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The Fresh and Open Sky

AND OTHER STORIES

BY RICHARD SULLIVAN

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For Jill and Molly

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The Fresh and Open Sky

AND OTHER STORIES

The Fresh and Open Sky

ONE MORNING years ago, Barney and I were out on the pier, fishing. It was a windy, golden morning and near us the lake was blue as gas flame; but far out against the sky line there was a white haze, and a fog-horn on the point a mile across from us kept braying. Sometimes the wind brought us the sound deep and loud, but sometimes there were only muffled honks. The water lapped sweetly against the wooden piles we sat on, and for a few minutes, as we baited our hooks, neither of us said a word. Then Barney told me that lately he had been thinking of going into the seminary.

I did not say anything to this because, until a few months before, I had been thinking of the priesthood myself; and I felt a little ashamed and embarrassed now that he should be considering what I had felt unfit for. I began talking about Cassie Brill. She was a very pretty girl, I said, and I thought I would like to marry her someday.

"She's too crazy," said Barney mildly.

I had felt this same thing myself but in gallantry now I could only deny it. "What do you mean, crazy?" I said. "You mean there's something wrong with her?" I tried to be indignant.

"No, no," said Barney. "I mean the way she does things, like when she brought that live flicker to school with her or when she took off her shoes and stockings that day without Sister seeing her till the bell rang. She does too many crazy things."

"That's nothing," I said perversely.

"What's nothing?"

"What if she does?" I said.

"You want to get married to somebody that's going to keep bringing birds with busted legs into the house all the time——?" The notion made him laugh, slowly at first and then uncontrollably, so that in a minute the tears were rolling down his cheeks. There is no arguing with a person like him who suddenly thinks of something funny and rolls all over the pier hugging his ribs in helpless hilarity. I began to laugh, too. It did seem funny to think of a grown-up woman bringing home wild birds.

"No," I said, "I don't mean I want flickers in the house——"

He cut me off with a spasm of laughter, pointing his finger at me and struggling to get out his handkerchief.

"No flickers!" he cried. "No flickers! Oh-h-h-h!"

But she's a nice girl, Peter. I'm not making fun of her." Again he broke into long laughter.

"Well, she's sure pretty," I said soberly. The coast-guard motorboat was just rounding the pier; the sun gleamed dazzlingly on the shining deck. That dancing boat on the bright blue water in the early morning reminded me of something I could not quite remember. "You can't deny that," I said to him. "She's the prettiest girl in our room."

"Oh, yes," he said. "If you like those skinny little things."

I glared at him and then saw it was no use. He was still thinking of flickers. He could not forget his laughter. But he was so completely good-natured in it, so simply and happily irresponsible, that I couldn't be angry.

"No," he said, wiping his eyes. "No, you're right. She is good-looking." Then he became very serious and he said: "But you look out she don't act to you like she did to Steve Niemaier, Peter. You be the boss if you start going with her."

I thought to myself it would be pretty hard to be the boss over Cassie Brill any time, but I didn't say anything. I was glad Barney was being serious, because what we were talking about was, at that time, the most important thing I knew. He didn't say any more either. But in a minute he touched me on the arm and said: "You got a bite."

I pulled in the perch and we fished for a while without talking.

I remember how, on the wide blue water, the little waves glittered in constantly moving jagged points. Between Barney and me I felt the good intimacy of silence. Far out against the sky line the white haze hung tremulous; it was somehow, illogically, like the curtain in a theater—that summer my parents had taken me for the first time to a play. Now, sitting on the pier with Barney, I felt the still fresh and unfamiliar excitement of suspense: it was as if soon, soon, the mist lifting out there would reveal some secret, wondrous scene. I cannot explain now, years later, the mysteriously thrilling effect of that sun-bright, fresh-blue, misty early morning. But I know I felt a confidence, a control, which has since been lost. Beyond the haze, far away on the sky line, lay secrets soon to be revealed. I began making plans aloud.

“If I could just hit like Johnny Ray,” I said.

“Can’t you?” said Barney. He knew what I was talking about, but, not being a good ballplayer himself, he didn’t know much about the game. I was second baseman on the Exchange Street Colts that summer, and Johnny Ray, who was in our room at St. Christopher’s, was shortstop on the Badger team, which played on a full-sized diamond in the Senior League.

“No,” I said. “I bet Johnny Ray’s the best ballplayer for his age in this country. He’ll be in the big leagues someday. You ought to see him hit. You

ought to see him field. Well, I guess I can field as good as he can, except on low ones. But you ought to see him hit."

"Can't you hit?" asked Barney again.

I shook my head. I could never see the ball coming. I could crouch and hope for a base on balls or I could stand there and let a pitch hit me that I couldn't see coming, but I couldn't hit for beans.

"Why not?" said Barney.

"I don't know. Maybe it's my eyes," I said. I had a pair of glasses at home under my handkerchiefs in the top dresser drawer. Nobody but my parents and the doctor knew about them. I was supposed to wear them all the time but I would not.

"If your eyes are good enough for fielding, shouldn't they be good enough for batting?"

"There's a big difference," I said.

"Would you like to be in the big leagues?" he said.

Of course, after the way I had been talking, nobody who knew much about baseball would have asked me that question; but we were friends and I tried to explain.

"Look, Barney," I said. "Yes, I would. Listen. You know what you said a little while ago about wanting to be a priest. I used to want to be a priest, too."

"You did?" His eyes, which were very bright blue, looked eager and glad.

"Yes," I said, and turned away from his eyes. "Only now I know I'm not supposed to be a priest."

Now I don't know exactly, but I think I want to be a ballplayer in the summer and a traveler in the winter. I know that isn't like being a priest, but I want it. . . ."

"I didn't know you ever thought about being a priest," he said slowly.

"Yes," I said, still not looking at him, "I did. But I haven't got a vocation. I even talked to Father Hegeman about it."

"I did, too," he said. "I don't know whether I've got a vocation either. He told me to wait awhile and think about it."

"That's what he told me," I said.

"And now you want to be a ballplayer and get married to Cassie Brill?"

I knew he was disappointed, but, looking out into the sky, I didn't think about him, but about myself.

"Yes," I said, "if I could just hit like Johnny Ray and make a lot of money so we could go traveling in the winter—all over, Barney, to India, and Jerusalem, and Tibet. . . ."

"Yes," he said, staring out at the lake. "It'd be nice, Peter."

I looked at him.

His lips hung open a little; the skin of his face was tight and pale; he seemed to be listening; below us the water lapped on the piles. I looked where he was looking. Far out on the lake the white haze was shifting in the sunlight, thinning out, and beyond

it now the low straight line between water and sky stretched dark and far off and mysterious.

I think we were as close that moment as I have ever been close to any human being.

A Rough Green Tree

IT WAS a big rough green tree, and it stood first in a line of fifty-odd trees along the road.

In the rain it looked very solid and sturdy. Beneath its leaves the grass was dry. The rain splashed on its leaves and slid off into puddles in the grass. The sky was a gloomy blue-purple, and the puddles reflected the color, shot through with the deep green of the submerged ground.

Down the road in the rain walked two men. One of them carried a big silvery saw, and the other carried two big coils of dirty rope. Their hip pockets were filled with hammers and wedges and pegs. All about the men on the road the beating rain made a silver stream as it splashed and bounced on the pavement. The men were soaked through. They walked hastily, furtively, beset by the rain.

They walked down the line of trees until they came to the big rough first tree. Here they stopped. One of them looked at the sky. The other one threw

down his ropes under the dry shelter of the tree.

"Come on under here, Henry," he called. "It's dry."

The other man was standing in the rain looking up at the purple sky. In the east a strip of yellow shone.

"Looks like it'll clear up," he said, staring at the strip of yellow. Then he too hurried in under the shelter of the tree and threw down his saw beside the ropes.

Both men looked desolate as they stood under the tree, staring out at the slanting silver rain.

They stood there for about a minute. On the road the rain made a hissing sound.

"Well," said one man, "I guess it won't let up, Elmer. We better get goin'."

So the man called Elmer strapped some spikes on his legs and, digging the spikes into the rough gray bark of the tree, started to climb. He carried the coils of rope over one arm.

"This is an old baby, Henry," he said as he swung himself into the crotch of the tree. "Lookut that bark, scaly as rock."

He said this with a certain admiration, and as he spoke, sitting in the crotch, he fingered the rugged branch sweeping out beside him.

The other man was looking at his saw. He was tightening a bolt at one end of the big blade. The blade looked very gray and deadly in the purple light, and the jagged teeth seemed very big and open.

The man in the tree kept climbing. He climbed all over, fastening the end of one rope here, the end of one rope there, throwing the two loose ends down to the ground. While he worked the man on the ground fixed his saw and then lit a pipe, throwing the match out into the rain.

Three birds flew out of the tree while the first man climbed around—two robins and a blue jay.

Finally the man in the tree slid down. Small bits of bark jumped out from beneath his hands as he came down the trunk. He seemed to be in a hurry. His hands were black and there was a smudge on his cheek, and his sweater was gray in front.

He stood under the leaves, looking out at the rain for a minute. The other man was lying on the dry grass, sucking at his pipe. Beside him, glittery gray, lay the saw.

The man who had been in the tree picked up the two loose ends of rope. He hunched his shoulders and ran out into the rain. He took the ropes far out in the field away from the road and, feeling in his pockets, he pulled out a hammer and pegged the ropes down in the field, far apart from one another. Then he ran hurriedly back to the shelter of the tree.

"Okay, Henry," he said.

Henry stood up. Very deliberately he picked up the saw and went over to the trunk of the tree.

"You could of started before, Henry," said Elmer, wiping his wet hands on the front of his sweater.

Henry gazed up along the trunk into the leaves.

Then he looked at the stretched ropes, thin, almost invisible lines against the sky in the rain. He seemed satisfied. He set the teeth of the saw against the bark of the tree and nodded to Elmer.

"Okay," he said. "Grab ahold."

Elmer gripped one end of the saw with both hands. Henry took the other end. Tentatively they pushed and pulled. Bits of bark ripped out; then the white inner flesh of the tree showed. The saw bit into it. A long crease looked slick and moist beneath the saw blade.

The men pushed and pulled. The blade sank half its width into the tree. Sweat began to stand in drops on the men's foreheads. Their armpits showed dark and they both grunted as they tugged and shoved their handles.

When the blade was just buried in the tree Henry said, "Wait."

He pulled a hammer out of one hip pocket and a wedge out of the other. With clashing metallic bangs he drove the wedge into the crease the saw had made. The wood of the tree seemed to close right down over the black steel wedge, but afterward the sawing was easier.

The rain rattled on the leaves. The air was very thick and sweet. The smell of wet grass and clover beat up out of the ground all about. The men kept sawing. Occasionally, they stopped to rest. Henry drove several more wedges into the crease.

Once while they were resting Elmer said: "I wonder how they're comin' on the other end."

"No tellin'," said Henry.

Elmer looked at the saw blade, which now lay almost halfway through the trunk.

"It seems kind of a shame, Henry," he said.

"No," said Henry. "You gotta figure it this way, the new road'll save a lot a lives."

"They could widen it on the other side," said Elmer, looking at the treeless fields across the road. The strip of yellow had disappeared from the sky.

"Yeah, they could," said Henry. "Only they don't want to. C'mon."

They stood up slowly and grabbed their handles. The saw made a grunting sound—"ooooooooh! oooooh!"—at each stroke. Little sprinklings of wet sawdust lay on the grass beside the trunk now; and the blade was more than halfway through.

Elmer cut his finger on the saw. Blood oozed out of his knuckle in a thick slow smear. He wrapped his handkerchief around the wound and kept sawing.

An automobile whizzed by, its tires droning on the wet asphalt.

When the saw was three-quarters through the trunk Henry said: "That's good, Elmer."

Then they both let go the saw and stood up. They moved to the edge of the dry circle underneath the tree. Then without saying anything they hunched their shoulders and ran through the rain toward the pegs which held down the slanting ropes. Henry

grabbed one rope and Elmer the other. They both looked at the tree.

It stood sturdy and dark green, lustrous in the rain. A white haze hovered over it where the rain splashed the leaves.

"O-kay!" yelled Henry suddenly, and he yanked on his rope.

Elmer yanked on his rope an instant later. They both fell over backward, all their weight pulling on their ropes, their heels digging into the mucky grass, their faces upturned to the rain and the purple sky. The tree leaned toward them. It hesitated. Then very slowly, almost frantically, it leaned farther. It looked very strange with its branches swinging sideways and down. The men took quick throbbing backward steps, pulling hard. The tree gave a heave. It made a wind that scattered the rain, a windy splash, and then it crackled and split, and thudded as it hit the ground.

For an instant the two men stood holding their slack ropes. Then they walked toward the tree and looked at it. Its underneath branches were all crushed. On top leaves sprayed out wildly into the air. The rain beat down. Now the light green circle around the stump was turning wet and dark. The stump loomed very yellow-white. There were clean straight even lines across it where the saw had cut, and at the side where the tree now lay there was a big jagged splinter sticking up.

Henry ran and picked up his saw; then he scooted

toward the dry shelter beneath the next tree, fifty-odd feet away.

"Get your ropes, Elmer," he yelled.

Elmer tore branches apart getting his ropes unfastened. Then he too ran for the next tree, dragging the loose ends of the soaked ropes behind him.

The rain rattled down over the fallen tree. It slid and pounded between the leaves and turned them silver side out. Around the stump the sawdust lay in a little pool now, and on a blade of grass sticking up from the pool was a smear of blood.

A Queer Kind of Sorrow

CHRISTY RED RATIGAN and I were on the swings at Bowl Park. We were on the little swings for kids under six—those swings are too small for us, but we were climbing up the chains.

It was a nice morning with a wind blowing through the trees and the leaves all glittering. One puff of wind you would smell the lake fresh and a little fishy, and the next puff you would smell the clover off in the fields. Christy Red was on the top bar of the swings and I was on the ground shaking the chains to make him fall down.

Then this man comes up with a little girl by the hand. "Get offa there," he yells to Christy Red, and to me he says out of the side of his mouth, "Let go a them chains." He was about the build of my brother Tommy, chunky and short, but he was old. He wore an underwear shirt stuck into his pants, and there was a lot of black hair on his chest; he had tight muscles and long hairy arms. I'd never seen him

before and I thought this was soon enough. His cheeks were full of brown blotches. There was a red scar on his forehead, and his eyes had a nervous look that worried you right away—his eyes looked hot inside. When he talked his lips fell out sideways and he had a sort of snarly laugh, as if he hated everything and was making fun of it. And his hot eyes went over us and around us as if he hated boys on swings worst of all.

Christy Red got down from the bar in a hurry and I let go of the chains. We stood looking at him while he lifted the little girl into the swing and put the slide down over her so she couldn't fall out. She was a scared-looking little kid with big eyes and a surprised look. She had freckles on her nose the same color as her hair.

This fellow put her in the swing and began pushing her. At first he didn't push her high, but she got worried as soon as she began to go up. She yelled to him, "Don't push me! Don't push me, Daddy! No-o-o-o! That's high enough!" She began to cry and she just hung on that swing with her legs stiff and her hands grabbing, and her eyes got all full and wet.

"What you want to come here for if you didn't want to swing?" says the man. "You said you wanted to swing, didn't you?" And he gives her a big push so she went up twice as high.

The girl just screamed she was so scared. "Go on," says the man. "It won't kill you." He began laughing

in a quick kind of grinding way, like a horse's whinny, and he kept pushing her harder, the kid whining and at the top of the swings screaming. We could see how scared she was. Christy Red was grabbing my arm. "Boy," I thought, "if I had a father like that . . ."

"I wanna get down, I wanna get down!" the kid was yelling, but the man kept swinging her as high as she could go; he kept laughing; even with the bar he swung her and the chain was squeaking. "Hey!" said Christy Red. "She wants to get down!" He acted as if he thought the fellow couldn't hear.

"Did I say anything to you?" says the man. He leaned way over and looked straight at Christy Red, hard, and he kept laughing. There was something wrong between his laugh and his eyes—they didn't match.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get outa here." I didn't like to see the look on that kid's face. The way that man laughed sounded crazy. I remembered when I was little the time I almost drowned off the pier and how scared I was.

When we went away he was still swinging her and laughing. We could hear the swing squeaking and over it her sobbing, "I wanna get down! Daddy!"

All day the thing stuck in my mind. I kept thinking about that man, and that night I dreamed about him. He had a knife in his hand and he kept chasing me around the swings and slides in Bowl Park. It was dark and his eyes shot out beams like searchlights,

and I had to keep dodging because those beams were hot.

I told Christy Red about the dream when we were on the big swings next morning. He said he had told his father about the man, and his father had said that next time anything like that happened we should get away in a hurry.

"There's no telling what a guy like that would do if he got mad."

While we were talking this same little girl comes along licking on an ice-cream cone. Right away we started to look around for the man, and we were ready to get away in a hurry, but this time the kid was alone. She stood there watching us for a long time, as if she was waiting for us to remember her. She had sort of curly hair and was pretty. Finally she said hello. "Hi," I said, to let her know I recognized her. "What's your name?" says Christy Red.

"Janey," she said, smiling.

"What's your last name?"

"What?" She frowned.

"He means what's your father's name," I said, looking all around again.

But she didn't seem to know what I meant. "I don't know," she said, shaking her head and frowning, as if nobody had ever asked her that before and it was a hard question. "What's your name?" she says to Christy Red.

"Christopher Ratigan," he says. "Say, was that really your father with you yesterday?"

"Oh, yes."

"He's mean to you, ain't he?"

"Oh, no," she says.

"What's the matter with his eyes?" I said.

"Nothing," she said.

"Are you adopted?" I said.

"What?"

"Is he really your father?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you like him?" says Christy Red. She was smiling now that we were talking about something she understood.

"He bought me this ice-cream cone," she said proudly.

Christy Red gave me a look. "Well," he says, "you can have him! I wouldn't own him for my old man!"

We didn't like to stay talking to her too long for fear he would come. Pretty soon we went over to the lake and she didn't follow us. We told all the other fellows about her father, and after that we were always watching for him in Bowl Park.

But the next time I saw him was way toward the end of the summer. My brother Tommy was walking me downtown to buy me new shoes for school. We were passing Fiddler's Green, and I see this fellow sitting on a bench looking out at the lake.

"There's a tough guy," I said to my brother.

"What do you know about him?" he says. "You keep away from him."

"Why?"

"That's all right why. You keep away from him."

"I know he's a tough guy," I said. "I know that all right."

"How do you know that?" he says.

I told him about that day on the swings and about Janey.

"You don't want to pay no attention to that," my brother Tommy says. "He was probably drunk when he did that."

"Do you know him?" I said.

"Sure," says my brother Tommy.

"What's his name?"

"Otto."

"Otto what?"

"Ben Otto."

"Is that really his little girl?" I said.

"Sure."

"How did you know him, Tommy?"

"Oh, I just knew him."

"What's he do?"

"Nothing, I guess. He used to raise trotting horses."

"Don't he do that any more?" I said.

"You ask too many questions."

"Do you like him, Tommy?"

"He's all right. I feel sorry for the poor guy."

"Why?"

"You wanna know too much."

"Why didn't you say hello to him just now?" I said.

"He didn't see us."

"Well, if you like him you coulda said hello to him. You don't like him any more than I do."

"You don't know anything about him," he said.

"I don't want to know anything about him!"

"If you knew anything about him you wouldn't talk so smart!"

"Well, tell me about him then," I says.

"You ain't old enough to understand."

"Oh, ain't I?" I says.

"No, you ain't!"

"I know a lot of things you don't think I know. I know about you and Alice Marshall."

"You shut up, you little rat!" he says.

"You go to hell!" I says. "You and your Alice Marshall!"

But I kept thinking and thinking after that and wondering what it was my brother wouldn't tell me.

That fall, just before Halloween, Christy Red and I were going to the Grove to play football after school. On the way we see this Ben Otto come weaving down the street, drunk as a lord, straight toward us. His head was hanging down and he was waving his arms and talking to himself. His pants were all full of dead leaves, as if he'd fallen down along the curb-ing someplace. "Look!" says Christy Red, grabbing my arm. "The guy that was in the Bowl that day!"

Right away I started thinking about what he'd do to that little Janey when he was like this. It made me feel brave and tingly and awfully sorry.

"Let's cross the street," says Christy Red. "He looks mean!"

"Huh!" I said.

"Come on," he said.

So we crossed the street and watched him. When he got right across from us I put my hand to my mouth and yelled, "Hey, Otto! You're drunk—you're drunk!" Maybe I didn't expect he'd even hear me. I think I did it more than anything to show Christy Red I wasn't afraid. But the fellow stopped and wheeled and gave us a look with those eyes of his, as if he'd skin us alive. I don't know if he remembered us and was mad or what. But he gave a sort of bellow and stretched out his arms and ran across the street after us, yelling.

"You—little—devils!"

Did we run! He came straight and swift as anything now. We got into the bushes at Bermingham's, cut across the back yards—he was right after us. We went over Bidinger's fence and across lots, then down Durkee Avenue south. We kept running till we got by the Dunes. And we didn't come back till six o'clock, when it was dark, and we took side streets then and kept watching for him.

But it was a long time before we saw him again. And by the next time I saw him I'd found out a lot more.

At Christmas time that year everybody in my family was going out to dances and parties, and one night my grandfather and I were sitting alone in the house

in front of the fireplace. My grandfather is a good one for remembering the old times and he likes to talk if someone will listen and not butt in. We began talking about different people in town and their marriages and families and all, and he mentioned Janice Voight.

"Who was she?" I said. I was getting sleepy, and the name had a sort of familiar sound, but I couldn't remember where I had heard it before.

"Well, sir, you've heard them talk of Janice," my grandfather said. "No? Ah, you just don't remember. Why, she broke more hearts than anybody in this county ever." He began to nod his head at me. "But that was only a few years ago," he said. "When was it she died?"

He stared at me as if I should know. "I don't know, Grampa," I said.

"Well, sir, it was only a few years ago," he said. He began to puff up his mustache and lips the way he always does when he remembers something he likes to talk about.

"She was the kind they didn't think much of till she went away, and then they kept remembering her," he said.

"Ah?" I said. I was getting sleepy.

"She was little and she had brown hair." He stared at me.

"Did she get married?" I said.

"Did she get married!" said my grandfather.

"Well, sir, she got married twice. Do you know Ben Otto?"

"Did she marry him!"

I jumped up in my chair. I shouldn't have said it so loud, because you can spoil my grandfather's stories if you act surprised at the wrong places. I began coughing to let on I had spoken sudden that way from a tickle in my throat. Then I yawned out loud and leaned back as if I was dead tired. My grandfather kept his head turned, watching me while he poked the fire. Then finally he sat back and settled himself.

"Well, sir, Ben Otto was her second husband," he said, puffing out his mustache. "There's a man has had a time of it." He looked at me and nodded. I nodded back.

"First him and Janice were engaged, and then they weren't engaged. She threw him over for Charlie Ellis. Then finally she married one of the Kipling boys, the second one—I forget his name, but he was a no-good. When he died Janice had a baby and a bed and a stack of hospital bills from keeping him at the Water-Cure. Those Kiplings were scum."

He looked at me and nodded sternly. "Drunkards," he said. "Scum."

"What about Ben Otto?" I said.

"Well, sir, she made it up with him again and married him." My grandfather stared at the fire.

I pretended to yawn. I was trying to find out all I could, but I had to act careless.

"That wasn't so good for him, was it?" I said.

"Well, sir, it was what he wanted," said my grandfather, squinting at me.

"Did they have any children?" I said.

"Him and Janice?"

"Yes. Is that little Janey their kid, Grampa?"

My grandfather unscrewed his eyes and threw his head back. "Well, well, well!" he said. "Do you know her? How old is she now?"

"About six, seven, I guess. Is there something wrong with Ben Otto?"

"Seven years," said my grandfather, shaking his head at the fire. "Well, sir, it does seem longer than that. They had a baby, but this ain't the one. That little—what did you call her?"

"Janey."

"Janey's a Kipling," said my grandfather. "She was Janice's baby that her first husband left her."

"Ah?" I said.

"Ben Otto's her stepfather," says my grandfather. "She's lived with him ever since."

"Ever since?" I says. "Ever since what?"

"Ever since Janice was killed," says my grandfather. "You know that bridge out on the Pike Creek road?"

He stared at me and I nodded.

"Well, sir, Ben Otto raised trotting horses——" He stopped, as if this was very important, and I kept nodding to hurry him. But he looked at me as if he remembered something he hadn't thought of before,

and I had a feeling that he didn't want to tell me the rest of the story.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Well, sir," he said, "Ben Otto had one crazy horse—what was the name of that horse?—it was the Dolly O. or the Sally O. Anyhow, they went out on the Pike Creek road with it and it jumped a bridge. You know the bridge."

"I know. Were they hurt?" I said.

"Were they hurt!" said my grandfather. He began to puff out his mustache and his eyes got excited. "Well, sir, Janice lived a couple of days. . . ." He stopped and gave me a queer hesitating look; then he cleared his throat. "Janice was just going to have a baby at the time," he said, looking away from me into the fire. "The baby was born—I remember it was a boy—and it died and then she died too. Oh, it was a sad thing all around," he said. "She had fine thick brown hair, I remember, and Ben Otto was telling everybody about the son he was going to have." My grandfather looked at the fire and kept his mustache puffed out a long time, and then he sighed.

"I suppose Ben Otto wasn't hurt at all?" I said.

"Well, sir, he cut his head open bad."

"Huh!"

My grandfather looked at me. "He's still got the scar on his forehead," he said.

"Yes, and I bet he was drunk when it happened!" I said.

"Oh, no," said my grandfather quickly. "It was the horse. You said you knew Ben Otto now?"

"I know him all right."

"He's not the same man now," said my grandfather. "Not a bit."

"No?"

"Not a bit. Well, imagine!"

"Imagine what?" I said. "I am imagining." Something in the way he talked, as if he was defending that Ben Otto without telling me why, something in the way he puffed out his mustache and stared at the fire made me mad.

Then he gave me a long look. "Listen, boy," he said. "That was that man's wife that was killed that way beside him. She was all bashed up. That was his son that died. He went through a time before he ever got Janice, and then he had to wait till she was through with two other men. And he wanted that son."

"Well?" I said, staring at the fire.

"You're too young," said my grandfather. "You don't know about these things."

"I can see it was too bad for him," I said. "But why does he have to take it out on that little Janey? It ain't her fault!"

"Who says he takes it out on Janey?"

"I say so."

"That's neither here nor there," says my grandfather. "You're too hasty."

"Just because he's had a hard time he gives her a hard time!"

"Don't you believe it," says my grandfather.

"He's a no-good drunkard," I said.

"Well, you can see what made him that. There's a lesson in it. He never touched a drop before the accident."

"They ought to take the kid away from him," I said. "He's no kind of man to have a child in the house."

"He's her stepfather," says my grandfather.

"Huh!"

"He'd be fond of anything that was Janice's."

"He's got a fine way of showing it, drunk all the time!"

"I don't say he should drink," says my grandfather.

"You never heard me say that about any man. But some men can face it and some men can't, and it's not for you and me to judge them."

"You just called Janey's father a scum."

"Him?" says my grandfather. "He never had any trouble to face. He was a scum."

"I don't see it," I said.

"You're too young," says my grandfather, and with that he lays his head back in the big chair and shuts his eyes. I sat for a long time looking into the wavy red fire and thinking.

That winter we went skating almost every night. The ice was froze hard inside the breakwater, and it was thick with kids and old people all the time.

Toward the middle of March it began to get mushy, and then they kept us off.

One night after school I went down to skate and there was a big crowd of people lined up along the edge of the ice. Way out, halfway to the breakwater, there was a man sliding along on his stomach, and out there right before him you could see a long dark spot of water where the ice had broken. I ran up in a hurry.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"A kid fell in! Keep off the ice!"

"Who is it?"

They were all watching the man out there. Nobody answered me. Christy Red came out of the crowd.

"Who is it?" I said.

"It's that little Janey!" he said. "That's that fellow out there—her father! Look, watch him now!"

"Ben Otto?"

He nodded. "The kid's down under someplace. Look, he's getting close!"

The man out on the ice was sliding nearer and nearer the hole. Beside him a kind of jerky black line was shooting away from the water, farther and farther, and then while we watched a lot of little cracks shot out from the end of the big one.

"There it goes! Ah, he'll never make it!"

All at once everybody was leaning way out toward the man on the ice. Christy Red was grabbing my arm. We all watched. Slowly out there he kept slid-

ing closer. "God," said Christy Red, "that ice must be cold on his belly!"

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know. The ice cracked. It was all mushy anyhow. I was putting on my skates here and they all came running in."

He was almost at the water's edge out there. You couldn't see anything in that dark pool of water.

"Is Janey the only one?"

"I guess so."

A couple of men came running toward us with a plank and a coil of rope.

"All right! Let us through there!"

They slid the plank out on the ice and they went out after it, trying to hurry and yet walk careful like cats with high steps, testing the ice. Their feet sank in and bubbles came up and every footprint filled right up after them with water. Then the ice snapped like a revolver shot, and another black line streaked in right along beside the plank and the two men.

"There it goes! . . . No . . . no . . . it's steady!"

My hands were sweating and I took off my gloves. The two men started looking around and then they shoved the plank a little farther out. One of them uncoiled the rope and let it drag. They went a little farther, slowly, and then way out there Ben Otto started to wave his hand to them to go back. We all swallowed and waited and watched.

"He's telling 'em to go back!"

"He don't want 'em to come out!"

"The ice won't bear three out there!"

He kept waving his arms for them to stay back. The two men stood still, as if they didn't know what to do. The ice was cracking around them now. Way out, Ben Otto was at the side of the hole. Then we could see his arm go down to the shoulder in the water. We could see him reaching and feeling. He worked his way halfway around the edge of that hole, feeling underneath for the kid. It was terrible to watch him. Then all at once, before any of us knew it, the ice all over just waved and crumpled; the men with the plank gave a run and a jump toward land; they made it safe. But out there, real slow and easy, Ben Otto just slid into the dark water in front of him, and everything broke up, and a big slab of ice floated free over the hole.

They didn't find the bodies till spring. All the town turned out for the funeral. They buried him like a hero, with Janey beside him, between him and Janice.

I admit he must have been fond of the kid in some way. I found out that he didn't have to go out there after her. He was up on the street when it happened, and somebody called him. When I think about it now I can't put together the difference between the way he was and the way he acted. Now that he's dead I can even feel sorry for him—not as much as for poor little Janey, but still sorry. Only it's a queer kind of sorrow. I have talked to

Christy Red about it. We both admit he was a hero. But we know that, hero or no, if he was alive today with that laugh and those eyes we would still be afraid of him. If he was alive we know we would both hate him, and it worries us.

Honeymoon

HE HAD BEEN married two weeks. They were still on their honeymoon. At the Dells, where they had gone, he had dutifully obeyed his mother and called on the Druckers. There they met Sid Becket. He wished to God now he had never called on the Druckers. He hated Sid Becket.

They hadn't had a minute alone since Sid Becket was introduced to them. They hadn't had a meal alone, or an afternoon alone, or even an evening alone. He was with them all the time, suggesting a swim, proposing a walk, always talking, always jabbering. He was clever, too. A clever talker. He knew all about history and art. The worst of it was he always talked to Nancy. She liked that kind of talk. Ever since they met Sid Becket she seemed gayer. One day she said she wished she knew more about art and history and all that kind of thing. He just nodded, as if he thought it was a good idea, but he felt resentful inside. And he got bitterly sullen when

Sid Becket said he would lend her some books. He couldn't talk, he was so angry. And after he had been silent for a little while she said she thought he must have a stomach-ache.

On the last day of their honeymoon they ate together, the three of them, again. They were going home on the eight o'clock train, but Sid Becket was staying on with the Druckers. They ate at the little place where there were the red and white checked tablecloths on the tables. He was afraid he'd get sick on the train, so he just ordered a sandwich. He said he wasn't hungry. Nancy wasn't hungry either. She ordered fruit salad and cinnamon toast and coffee. But Sid Becket said he was going to eat a farewell dinner in their honor. He looked at Nancy and said it'd take a lot of food to bolster him up after they had gone. He said "they," but it was easy to see who he really meant. He was always saying things like that—veiled things that you could see through. Nancy never seemed to notice.

When Sid Becket got his steak and french-fried potatoes and lettuce salad he insisted on giving some to Nancy. She said "Oh, no," and declared she couldn't eat it; but he insisted, and she just laughed while he cut off half the steak and put it on her plate with some french-fried potatoes. Then she said he'd better try some of her fruit salad, and he said he would. While she was helping him to the fruit salad he looked over and said: "I wonder if your husband would like some steak." There was

only half a steak left. It was easy to see who he wanted to share with. Nancy laughed and said she didn't think her husband was very hungry tonight. "Are you, dear?"

"If I wanted steak, I'd have ordered it," he said quietly.

During the meal Sid Becket talked about history. He said that Napoleon nationalized Italy and that external aggression nationalized France, and that France nationalized Germany. He said war nationalized all those countries and that really this was a marvelous country because it was so big and yet all the parts were so friendly and they all spoke one language. This was a marvelous rich country, he said, only it didn't have the culture those other countries had. He said when he was over there he had been truly amazed at their culture. All the time he was talking he kept taking up big forkfuls of steak and potatoes. Nancy was hanging on his words. When he got through eating he wiped his mouth with the napkin and said: "I saw a beautiful dress in a window down the street here. Green crepe." He smiled and winked and bent his head toward her. "It'd look good on you, all right," he said. "That's what I thought when I saw it."

When the check came Nancy insisted that Sid Becket should not pay it. He made a good bluff at wanting to, but you could see he was pretty well satisfied at getting a free meal. After supper they all walked up the street to the hotel. They got the suit-

cases and paid the hotel bill. Then Sid Becket said he would go to the station with them and see them off. It was twenty to eight, so they had plenty of time. They strolled down toward the station, each man carrying one suitcase, with Nancy walking between them swinging her handbag. "Oh, I hate to leave the Dells!" cried Nancy suddenly. "It's so beautiful here. Don't you hate to leave the Dells, darling?"

"Well, yes and no," he said. "It's going to be nice to get home."

"The Dells," said Sid Becket, "is one of nature's wonder spots. Did you see the place where Blackhawk jumped the river in 1848?"

That was the way he always was. You couldn't say a word without his turning it into history. He started telling them about how Blackhawk was pursued by an enemy tribe and they thought they had him captured when they got him along the cliffs above the river. But he just reared back and got a little start and jumped his pony clear across to the cliffs on the other side. Forty-foot jump, they said it was. It was almost unbelievable. "I believe it," said Nancy. "Don't you, dear?"

"I suppose so," he muttered.

"Darling, why are you so quiet?"

"He's worried about missing that train," said Sid Becket. "Say, you'll have to come back next summer. I'll be here again, I imagine."

"Oh, we could have some wonderful times!" said Nancy. "Oh, I'd love to!"

Suddenly Sid Becket looked attentively at her shoulder. He stopped, put down the suitcase, and said: "Come here. Wait." He brushed her shoulder with his hand, and then, smiling, picked off a long thread of her hair with his fingers. She smiled.

"Oooh!" she said. "Thank you."

"Thank—you," said Sid Becket. The three of them walked on. The hair stayed loose, as if forgotten, in the hand with which he carried the suitcase. It was easy to see if you looked for it.

When they got to the station the baggage master's dog started barking at them. The station agent came out and gave a kick at the dog to shut him up. "You want tickets?" he said.

"Two to Baysweep," said Sid Becket loudly, as if one of the tickets was for him.

"Ooh, I forgot all about tickets," said Nancy.

While he was inside getting the tickets Sid Becket and Nancy stood alone on the platform. He wondered what they were saying. He wished the station agent would hurry with his change; but when he had it and walked out the door he suddenly slowed up and approached his wife and her friend at a casual saunter. He wasn't going to act worried. "I got the tickets," he said.

Sid Becket was talking. ". . . after that I always thought it could never happen again," said Sid Becket. "But it has." He stopped.

"So you've got the tickets," said Nancy. She seemed a little embarrassed.

They didn't talk much more. In a few minutes the train came. Sid Becket shook hands warmly with each of them. "Come back next summer," he said as they got on the train. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" they called. The engine chugged, the wheels ground slowly, the train moved, and they stood waving. "Good-by-e-e-e!"

As soon as they were settled in the coach with their suitcases up on the racks and their legs stretched out on the seat before them, he turned to Nancy and said: "Happy?"

"Um-huh," she said, smiling intimately.

He felt relieved. He felt close to her. He was glad they were going home. He slipped his arm into the crook of hers and fingered her bare wrist happily. There was no one near them in the coach. He leaned his head over and kissed her lightly, softly, on the cheek. She turned readily and gave him her lips, full and moist. They kissed. She put her hand on his cheek and pressed. A long time. Then they looked at each other. "What was he saying to you on the platform?" he whispered gently. Her eyelids were drooping. She acted sleepy. "Oh," she said, "he just—talking. You know." She put her lips up and he bit down into them, deep and passionately. He wanted to kill Sid Becket. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

In a Glass Darkly

HE GLARED at his image in the big mirror over the marble-top table in the hall: his thinning hair, his slightly puffy pink cheeks, his gaping mouth twitching furiously, his twisted necktie outflung over one sloping shoulder, his whole long skinny torso. One of his hands grabbed the brass candlestick on the marble-top table; his eyes in the mirror flickered white; slowly, slowly, he raised the candlestick. Face to face, he thought: There he is, the perfect husband; observe him well and note the markings, because now you see him, now you——

It had all been going nicely. Oh, he was lonesome, but not like this, not aware of himself. Never before in his life had he been so terribly aware of himself, so painfully, embarrassingly close to himself as now, glaring with upraised brass candlestick at himself, glaring back with upraised brass candlestick and white eyes, in the mirror.

Edwina had started it. They were eating, and

"Barry," she said, switching the conversation abruptly to him, "you can tell us now. Are you and Rita always really so happy? I mean, is it the same behind the scenes?" And she laughed, very inquisitively.

He looked from Edwina's opaque black marble eyes on his right to the steady cowlike brown gaze of Miss Sigfried, the psychologist, across the table from him, and, patting his thinning hair, he smiled nervously. "Well, I really—this is very interesting——" He turned to George on his left.

George was grinning. He bit with strong white teeth into a small radish. "This is the first time you've been away from her, Barry?"

"Well," said Barry, wishing he could invent quickly, "yes. Yes, it is. Oh, of course," he added quickly, "I've been away, but this is the first time Rita and John have been away together from me, from our home." Involved with words, he hoped he could change the talk to an elaborate explanation. "You understand what I mean, George?"

"I understand all right," said George, grinning.

"Barry is the perfect husband," explained Edwina to Miss Sigfried. "You should see him."

"Well!" cried Miss Sigfried in a minor explosion of amazement.

"So attentive! Honestly, you'd think they were on their honeymoon."

Both women, smiling as if they shared an amusing secret, looked at Barry. He patted his hair.

"Well, I must say," he stammered, "this is like seeing yourself in a new mirror. I never thought——"

"Seeing yourself with a dark eye glassily," said George. "Oh no! It's a glass eye darkily. Mark Twain."

"Is that Mark Twain?" exclaimed Barry eagerly. "I'd wondered. It's very good. A dark eye glassily!"

"No, a glass eye darkily, I think. Yes, a glass eye——"

Miss Sigfried giggled. Then with shrewd benevolence she asked, "*And* how long have you been married, Mr. Ferguson?" He remembered how she said it, accenting the first word: "*And* how long——?"

He twisted his face as if thinking hard. "Oh, six, well, almost seven years," he told her. He turned to George. "Let's see, you and Edwina were married after us, weren't you? Yes, sure——"

"They have a son—almost five years old," Edwina told Miss Sigfried. "You'd like Rita, she's little and dark. What did Margaret say about her? Oh, yes—Barry, Margaret says Rita looks like a woman well loved."

"Margaret, eh? Yes, well——!"

"Nobody says that about me!" complained Edwina in a whoop to Miss Sigfried, and both women laughed happily.

"You're lucky to have a provider, my girl," said George. He turned to Barry. "We can't all be old Romeos like this fellow."

"I don't know just how to take all this," pro-

tested Barry. "Look, do Rita and I impress everybody as being, well—?"

"Lovebirds," said Edwina.

"But how? I mean—?"

"Wherever you go you're always so attentive, and Rita treats you as if she just expected it. She's casual. *You* know. That's why I asked you if it was the same way behind the scenes. Don't you ever have fights?"

Barry's face twisted.

"His married life is one perpetual dream," said George, grinning, "a dream of fair woman. What's the matter with you, Barry? That's what you're supposed to say."

"Of course!" cried Barry. "That's it, of course!" He laughed strenuously, to block further comment, and then suddenly he remembered the dream he had had the night before.

After dessert and coffee they played bridge for a while, and he and Rita did not come up again as a subject; but all the time Barry felt that Miss Sigfried was examining him like something smeared on a slide, and he was haunted by that dream of Rita; it came back now with overwhelming intensity: they were alone in a strange house, the children away someplace—there were several children and they were all away—Rita wore a new dress, misty-black, and a black unfamiliar hat; she came to him, a low music started, grew, spread, clear, very lilting, the piano strong and bright; she clung to him

lightly, they danced, she was a faint familiar pressure against him as they whirled, whirled slowly, unearthly, like persons moving in water, the sweet growing force of the music around them like water; he was waked from the dream by the noise of the music; he sat up in bed, hearing still in the dark room the full round clarity of sound, so clear, so intense, that he sang aloud the shining wordless melody, determined to remember it, to tell it to Rita when she came back, to tell her this rich dream-strangeness.

But in the morning, though the dream was vivid, the sound of the music was unrecapturable; playing as Edwina's partner, he had strained again to hear it, forgotten music beyond the remembered fact; and it stayed beyond.

"Oh, but I really must go," Miss Sigfried had said at last, glancing with exaggerated concern at her wrist watch.

"Well, I can give you a lift too, Barry," George told him, after Edwina had said it was still early and Miss Sigfried had said yes, but her work got her up at five every morning.

"I think I'll walk, George. It's not far. I walked over."

"I have to take the car out for Siggy, anyhow."

"I'd rather walk, George. It's a nice night. Really."

"Full moon," said George, peering at him with rather ponderous slyness. "Don't know whether a

romantic bachelor like you should walk in the full moon or not."

A cloud like a thick black snake had twisted across the moon as he walked. It was late summer; the night air was heavy; faraway thunder made the sky tremulous and vital. A few sudden drops of rain splashed on him just as he was turning into his own yard; he scooted to the porch.

Stuck in the screen door was a special-delivery from Rita. He scraped his forehead on the door edge in his anxiety to get inside quickly, to read the letter.

Rita asked him to remember that her ivy needed water, and to send her some money at once; she said John was being an absolute little devil. "Your letters are so mournful," she wrote. "Don't be silly. I'll be back in two weeks. You sound like a widower." She sent love from herself and his son.

He sat there with the letter on his lap. He patted his thinning hair. He had to admit, he told himself, that he was possibly more in love with Rita than she had ever been with him. Yes, he had to admit that. She had said nothing about missing him, nothing even to hint about loneliness. She wrote like a well-loved woman, confidently and casually.

He began to feel resentful. He went over to his desk. On it lay the letter he had started to Rita before he had gone out to dinner. He caught the final words—"most desolate." No use a man's making a fool of himself. He tore up the unfinished letter,

then sat down at his desk. She wouldn't like it if he took up with some little blonde while she was gone, though, would she? No, she wouldn't like that. But she knew he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't either. No use trying to fool himself.

Opening his desk drawer, he took out his checkbook and wrote a check to her. "There," he said aloud in the empty house; the word sounded solemn and sharp—"There."

He loosened his necktie and opened his collar. The stale air in the room oppressed him. Outside, low in the sky, thunder rumbled. He went to the window. The moon had gone and slow thick rain streamed in the darkness; he could hear it beyond the glass, a stir out there, monotonous and insistent.

He was a comic figure, he supposed, the romantic husband with the thinning hair and the confident, beautiful wife. Plays had been written about him, songs, stories. As long as men had lived he had been funny.

He remembered something he had read somewhere about American husbands—that they were weak and complaisant while their wives were the hardest, shrewdest, most beautiful women on earth. He wondered if that was so; how would a writer get facts on a thing like that? He sniffed angrily: a writer wouldn't need any more facts than Edwina did; just look at Rita and himself—after six years, almost seven, he was still as devotedly, as

slavishly, in love, no, more devotedly, more slavishly, in love with his wife than he had been when they were married. The perfect husband, no use denying it; nothing had worn off for him; it was all the same. Except that for Rita it had worn off. Except that.

Outside dark rain hissed steadily down; and thunder, very far away, was like a sound remembered, not heard; was dimly, illogically, like the sound of unremembered music from his dream.

He walked out into the hall and caught sight of himself in the mirror. There he was in the honest glass, darkly; and he thought of George and his ponderous wit, of George's white teeth biting down on the radish, of Edwina's black inquisitive eyes and the bovine placidity of Miss Sigfried, whose work got her up at five in the morning, and of—what was it Margaret said?—of the well-loved woman, his wife.

Suddenly he leaned forward, glaring at himself and hating the contamination which his very reflection seemed to him. For sheer, pure ignominy, the weak complaisant husband—the perfect husband!—brought face to face with himself was the most excruciating——

This was when, passionately, he grabbed the brass candlestick from the table. He raised it slowly, intending to smash the mirror, savoring bitterly all the urgent violence of the instant. "Now you see him, now you don't," he muttered. And then, as he glared into the whites of his close-up glaring eyes, he

was suddenly overwhelmed with surprise at his own intensity. Peering at himself in the mirror, he was amazed. He gaped and blinked. All at once his customary discretion returned to him in a good familiar rush of common sense. He snorted almost contemptuously at his threatening image, brandishing that great brass weapon in the glass. Carefully he set the candlestick down; it made a heavy clink on the marble-top table. Why, with it he could kill a man, he could have smashed that mirror into a thousand chips. He felt a kind of weary admiration at himself, at his display of temperament. He had never before in his life felt the way he did tonight, or rather the way he had felt tonight; for it was all over now, he realized ruefully, all over. To be so full of angry blood, so revengeful—he had rather liked it. Certainly no one who knew him would ever suspect his real interior violence. He smiled and shook his head at himself in the glass. It had been insane and very satisfying, but, well, to smash an expensive mirror like this one, which, he now remembered, had been Rita's mother's—well, he thought, to do that—!

Turning to go upstairs, he felt a little puzzled. But it was all fidgets, of course. Nervous nonsense. He had been lonely and sensitive; Edwina had hurt his feelings. Must be careful about showing such things—he wondered if his embarrassment had been noticeable during the evening. He'd call Edwina tomorrow.

As he snapped off lights on the stair landing, he heard the faint uneasy roll of far-off thunder. It seemed to him very peaceful and soothing. Maybe that writer was right about American husbands and wives—but, well, it didn't make much difference, did it? Not much difference, he decided, not much. And walking up the final three stairs, he wondered hopefully if tonight he would dream.

Things Past

BARNABY felt tired and nervous. He had twice driven around the block looking for a parking space. When Nell suddenly pointed down an alley and cried, "There's a horse! Look, Julie, see the pretty horse!" he thought at first that she had found a space, and he slacked the car. Then he understood. "A horse, eh?" They were past the alley and there was no use trying to look, but he felt a kind of slow-rising excitement as he groped for a memory. When I was a little boy, he thought, when they took me to Chicago that time, to Grandpa's. "Did you see the horse, Julie?" he asked his small daughter.

By now they were at the corner and Julie was wailing that she hadn't seen the horsy. Barnaby started around the block again. A horse in all this traffic, you didn't often—a little boy, he thought, those horses in Chicago, how many years ago now, there were millions of them and they were all big. I never saw so many big horses, they had those

things like horns sticking up from their collars with gold balls on top, the wheels and hoofs thundered on the cobblestones, all horses in that traffic, no gas fumes, we rode in a hack from the station, it squeaked and smelt leathery. "Nell," he said, "we have to show her that horse. Why, the poor kid, she's never seen a horse up close. My God, think of it, it's got so a horse is a rarity!"

Nell sighed and stared across at him blankly. "When I was little there were always horses," she said. "I remember. Of course the streets were all dirt."

"My father and one of his brothers owned a race horse once," began Barnaby, but Julie bounced over to his side of the seat and interrupted, "Daddy, can I have a popsicle?"

"Later, darling," said Barnaby. "It was a pretty good race horse too—Dolly B. or Daisy B. or something. Of course that was before I was even born."

"A double one," insisted Julie.

"Quiet, darling." Nell drew the child over to her. "You'll disturb Daddy while he's driving. Mr. Dewey over on the other side of our block at home had a horse," she went on. "Once when I was only a little bigger than Julie he gave me a ride in his buggy. It was a brown horse, I think."

Barnaby glanced at her. She was smiling. Suddenly he felt soothed, peaceful, better than he had

felt all day. " 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought,' " he said.

"What?"

"Quotation. 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought I dum-da-dum remembrance of things past, I dum-da-dum-da-dum a thing I sought.' Horses. I mean it's nice seeing that horse and remembering this way."

"Dum-da-dum," said Nell. "Ain't we intellectual. Quotations and all!"

"No, I just mean——" But by this time they were around the other side of the block and there was a parking space near the alley. Barnaby stopped, cut the wheel sharply, and backed in. "Don't you worry, honey," he told Julie. "We'll show you that horsy!" He jerked the car forward and hit the curb.

"Scraped the tire," said Nell.

It was one of the new tires, too. "Just grazed," murmured Barnaby, wishing he was right.

"You'd better lock the car, Tom." Nell helped Julie out onto the sidewalk, then climbed out of the car herself. "My library books are in back."

"You take her on ahead then. Poor kid," he crooned, bending over Julie, "never seen a horse except in her picture book, has she?"

Julie stared up at him. "Daddy! Is this the horsy in my horse book?"

"No, no, honey, this is a *real* horse. Take her on with you, Nell—I'll catch up." He was trying to get

his key into the door lock, but turned to look over his shoulder at his wife. "Did you hear that? 'Is this the horsy in my horse book?'" He shook his head and sighed.

Nell said rather sharply. "That's the ignition key you're trying there."

Barnaby thrust another key at the lock. A policeman stalked up, stopped, and marked the rear tire with chalk; he gave Barnaby a heavy glance, then ponderously shifted his gaze to the fifteen-minute parking sign on the nearby lamppost.

"Okay," said Barnaby, "okay."

But before he got the door locked, Nell and Julie were back. "It's gone," explained Nell. "It turned around. We saw it way down the other end of the alley."

"Could we catch it around the block?"

"Well, we might, but——"

"Come on, then!" cried Barnaby. "Ah, look, she's been crying! Poor little Julie wants to see her horsy, don't you, dear?"

"She wants to see a double popsicle," muttered Nell.

But they all got into the car again and started off. Barnaby felt a little silly chasing the horse this way; he even felt a little angry; but more than anything he wondered what Nell was thinking. As he sneaked out into the line of traffic behind a delivery truck he shook his head impressively. "I remember how I wanted a pony when I was a boy,"

he said, and then looked carefully over at Nell. But apparently she didn't seriously mind his horse chasing.

"Once a pony tried to bite me," she said. "He was so cute, but as soon as they put me on him he turned around and tried to bite me."

"I wanna pony," sniffed Julie; she glanced from her mother to her father and murmured passionately: "I love ponies!"

"Listen, honey," said Barnaby, turning a corner. "One time Daddy sold perfume all over the neighborhood trying to win a pony for a prize."

"Bluing," said Nell.

"What?"

"It wasn't perfume. You told me before. It was bluing."

"I guess it was at that," nodded Barnaby.

"Anyhow, you didn't win the prize," said Nell.

Again he looked quickly over at her, but she didn't seem to have meant anything by the remark. She was gazing serenely at the back of the delivery truck. When the truck stopped at a red light Barnaby said tentatively, "I suppose it must seem sort of crazy driving around after a horse this way."

"Well, maybe just mildly," said Nell. "But who ever said we were sane?"

"I love perfume!" cried Julie in sudden rapture.

"Just you wait, honey. Daddy'll show you a real horsy!"

"Daddy better get moving now that the light's green," said Nell. "Or does Daddy like it here too much to ever leave?"

Barnaby shot the car around the corner. "Now keep watch," he warned. "You take that side and I'll take this when we go by the alley!"

"Old Tom Barnaby, unparalleled hunter of horses!"

"There!" cried Barnaby. "I saw him. He's just about to the end of the alley over in the next block. Say, he's moving along! But we can catch him over there."

"Do you *really* want to, Tom?"

Barnaby tried to look indifferent. "Well, I think we owe it to Julie," he explained. "After all, if a horse is such a rarity that a child can live practically five years without even *seeing* one close up——"

"Julie, do you want to see the horse?"

"Sure, Mamma!" cried Julie. "I wanna horsy. Where's a horsy?"

Nell sighed. Barnaby smiled at the passing traffic.

"You win," Nell told him, "although I must say I never in my life before spent so much time over one horse. Even when it bit me," she said. "I wonder what kind of a horse it is. I mean I wonder what kind of wagon it's hitched to. I remember when there were beer wagons with horses. I used to play with a little girl in our neighborhood at home; she had an uncle who drove a beer wagon. We used to have a butter man, Mr. Steemer; he

came every week in the nicest bright yellow wagon, with a horse of course, and dogs running behind."

"Sure," said Barnaby. "Dalmations, probably."

"What?"

"Dalmations. Black-and-white. Coach dogs, they used to call them. They always used to follow horses."

"Mr. Steemer's dogs were water spaniels," said Nell. "They were brown, and there were two of them, only one died finally. That was King; the other one's name was Curly."

"It's certainly kind of crazy to do this," said Barnaby as he swept around a corner, "but, you know, Nell, it's kind of ironic too, it's really ironic. I mean when you think here we are chasing this horse around just—well, to give Julie a look at it, of course, and to see it ourselves, because we can remember years ago when there were horses everywhere, and—well, I mean when you think how things have changed in our own lifetimes, Nell."

"Sure have changed," said Nell.

"*There's* a horsy!" yelled Julie.

They all saw it at the same time on the cross street ahead. It was a fine, clean brown horse, pulling a tidy black buggy in which sat a white-haired man wearing a black hat and suit and a black bow tie.

"Might be an ad for something," said Nell. "Only there's no sign on it."

Barnaby leaned toward his daughter. "Julie," he said, "I want to tell you something. When I was a little boy my grandpa used to belong to the Green County Horse Thief Protective Association. You don't know what that is, but I'll explain it to you."

"I didn't know that," said Nell. "You never told me that."

"I just remembered it now," explained Barnaby; he felt flattered by her interest. "In those days there were lots of horses everywhere, Julie, and there were men who stole horses that didn't belong to them. Those men were called horse thieves——"

"Like gangsters," interrupted Nell; and Julie nodded knowingly.

"—And one time my grandpa—that's your great-grandfather, Julie—went all the way to North Dakota with the sheriff to catch a horse thief. The sheriff's name was Warberton, and he and your great-grandfather caught the horse thief and brought him back home and put him in jail."

"That's nice!" cried Nell. "I *like* that!"

"That's *nice*, Daddy!" proclaimed Julie, mimicking her mother's accents.

"Well," said Barnaby, "it's something you ought to know. My grandpa was mighty proud of it."

They had turned a corner and ahead of them now the horse was pulling into another alley in the middle of the block. It stopped there, and the white-haired old man climbed stiffly out of the buggy.

"We can park here!" cried Barnaby, swinging the car into a parking-lot driveway. "It's worth a quarter this time! I'll take it out of my lunch money for next week. You go on ahead with her, Nell, while I pay the guy."

Nell jumped out and lifted Julie. They started off, hand in hand. Barnaby waited for the parking-lot man, who came up grinning.

"Little girl wants to see the horse, eh?"

"That's right," said Barnaby.

"Well, you don't get a chance to see many of 'em any more."

"No—not many."

The parking-lot man gave Barnaby his change. "You don't hardly get a chance to see one unless in a circus or out on one of them dude ranches!" he answered, and spat on the gravel. "Nothin' but cars!" he snorted.

"That's right!" Barnaby ran after his wife and child. He caught them on the crowded sidewalk. Julie was hanging back, tugging at Nell's arm.

"Come on!" Barnaby told them. "We don't want to miss it again."

"Julie!" said Nell.

"N-n-n-no!" said Julie, stiffening her knees.

"Come on!" Barnaby picked her up. Beyond the people ahead stood the brown horse in the alley. "See?" he cried, boosting her high. "See it, honey?"

"I don't wanna!" screamed Julie. "It's gonna bite

me!" She wriggled in his arms and kicked him in the chest.

"Julie!"

"I wanna go away!" she yelled.

"It's all right, darling, it's all right!" cried Nell. "Give her to me, Tom. Wait! Now, now, now, Mamma's going to take care of you!"

People on the sidewalk were looking at them and smiling. "I wanna go *home*!" wailed Julie. They were so close to the horse that Barnaby saw the springs go down as the old man climbed into the buggy. He saw the old man's mouth move as he clucked to the horse. "Now, now, now," murmured Nell, cuddling Julie. "I think if we got her a pop-sicle, Tom——"

She paused abruptly when she saw Barnaby watching the horse go down the alley.

"Oh, Tom! Don't feel that way! It was a *grand* idea!"

"I don't know why I got so excited," said Barnaby. "It was a crazy idea, anyhow."

Hearing Julie cry, he felt almost like crying himself, but he knew that would be crazy, too. Then Nell set Julie down on the sidewalk. "Now stop it!" she said firmly. She slipped her arm through Barnaby's, so that the crooks of their elbows were together. "Stop crying!" she warned Julie again, and reached down to take the little girl's hand. Together the three of them started back to the parking lot. Nell walked very close to him, pressing his

arm, her steps in rhythm with his. When he looked down at her she was looking up at him; then Julie let out a long, tremulous sigh, and Barnaby and Nell, looking at one another, slowly, almost unwillingly, began to smile.

(from *The New Yorker*)

Old Pal

I STOPPED OFF at the Shamrock Tavern late that afternoon on my way home from the store. Ollie Brooks came into the place about five minutes after I did. I was surprised. He'd left town soon after he got out of school, and I hadn't seen him for ten, twelve years. I went to school with him from first grade right on. He was the kind of kid who went into the ice-cream store with you, pretending to have his own nickel, and then laughed as if it were a fine joke to make you pay. I never particularly cared for Brooks.

He had put on a stomach and jowls since I had last seen him; he was brown from the sun, and his yellow hair was slicked back thin and flat over his scalp; he wore a maroon shirt with white buttons, and a yellow tie; the trousers of his checked suit were creased straight up and down without a break. "Petel!" he cried when he saw me at the bar. He shook my hand and put an arm around my shoul-

ders. "Well, now, you're going to have a beer on me, Pete!"

"I've got a beer," I said.

"You're going to have another. Hey, Mac!" He rapped on the wood with his knuckles, and old Albert, the bartender, came up toward us. "A beer for my friend and me, Mac!" Then, as the old man turned away, Brooks bent toward me and whispered, "Who the hell is he—Methuselah?"

"Albert just helps out in the afternoons," I said.

Brooks sat down on the stool beside me. "Albert, eh? Well, I'd say he was about ready to be retired. Pete, you know the old town's just exactly what it used to be."

"When'd you get back?" I asked.

"Just four—no, five days ago." He cleared his throat. "Here on business, you know. Selling." He fished a card out of the breast pocket of the maroon shirt and handed it to me. The card read, "Imperial Furnace Company." "What kind of furnace you got in your place, Pete?"

"I live in an apartment now."

Nodding, he took the card away from me and returned it to his pocket. "We got a wonderful line," he said. "Best in the country."

Albert set two glasses of beer in front of us and shuffled away.

"Here's to your health, pal!" Brooks said.

I drank from the glass I'd bought myself. "You going to stay in town now?" I asked.

"For good?" He grinned at me over his half-emptied glass. "Not me, pal! I'll be through here in three weeks! Oh, it's nice to get back, and all, but this place—well, the truth is, I'm not the kind of guy to stick around the old home town all my life. No offense to you, Pete." He laid a hand on my arm.

"That's all right," I said. "I happen to like it here."

"Oh, the place has got merit. I wouldn't say it didn't have merit. Fact is, this guy that works with me and I are doing a land-office business here right now. We come into a town and we put on a campaign for the local dealer, see? Then we go somewhere else, do the same thing. You have another beer, Pete?"

"I haven't got to this one yet."

"Hey, Albert!" he called. "One more coming up quick! Pronto, eh, boy?" He turned back to me. "Dawson and I are really going places in this game, Pete. You ought to see us work. We got a system. House to house, seeing all the cute young wives, you know. We work separately. I go first, inspect the furnaces, recommend this, recommend that, shoot a flashlight around inside, and talk about the cement falling out and the cracked fire pot and the dangers of gases overcoming the little kiddies in their sleep." He chuckled and shook his head. "Then, if the party acts doubtful, why, I just bring Dawson over later in the day, introduce him as our

head engineer, who just happens to be with me, and Dawson gives 'em an expert opinion and a special price for signing right then and there. Pete, you'd be surprised how people act. They sign those order blanks before we get 'em filled out. Honestly, you'd think we were saving their lives, Dawson and me!"

"When all you're doing is selling them a bill of goods," I said.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" Brooks said. "Let's be fair now, Pete. I don't like your tone there, friend. We don't sell any bill of goods—we sell service and Imperial furnace parts, and there's none better in the nation!"

"Only, you don't worry too much about whether they really need your damned parts and services."

He grinned. "Know me from way back, don't you? But it's just good, plain business." He jerked his left arm up, looked at his wrist watch and frowned. "I got to meet Dawson over on Lake Avenue in ten minutes. Time for another beer, I guess."

"None for me," I said.

"I suppose I better not have one myself, come to think of it. Sometimes you can ruin a deal by too much of a smell on your breath. Business before pleasure."

"That's right," I said.

"Albert!" Reaching into a trouser pocket, he drew out a thick wad of bills. "Dawson and I get ours right at the source," he said, unrolling his

money. "The customer's down payment is our commission. Never a job without a down payment, Pete. You still plugging along at the store, are you?"

"Still there."

He rolled up his paper money and stuck it back in his pocket. I saw that he had a half dollar ready to hand to Albert. "Here you are, boy," he said.

The old man took the coin, peered at it, then dropped it on the bar. It made a queer, muffled noise. Albert shook his head. "It don't look good."

"It's a coin of the republic!" Brooks said. "It's legal tender! Come on, give me my change. Two beers for me and one for my friend, here!"

Albert laid the half dollar in front of me. "What you think, Pete?" he asked.

"It looks as if it might be counterfeit," I said. "But I don't know . . . You've got other money on you, Ollie. Why don't you pay the man? Maybe he'll want to buy some furnace parts from you."

Brooks slammed his fist down on the bar so hard that the beer glasses jumped. Then he looked from Albert to me and smiled. "It's the principle of the thing," he said gently, as if his feelings had been hurt. "Naturally, a man don't like his good faith to be questioned." He picked up the half dollar and, without looking at it, dropped it in his shirt pocket. Then he laid a dollar bill on the bar.

As the old man hobbled off to the cash register, Brooks leaned toward me and whispered, "Damn conniving bus driver slipped me that four bits this

morning. Been waiting all day to unload it, and don't ever think I won't, pal!" Reaching out his hand to Albert for his change, he said to me, "Well, it's nice to have run into you, Pete."

I didn't offer to shake hands; he stood there jingling his coins.

"Hope I'll see you again before we leave town," he said.

"Oh, we'll run into one another," I said.

"Now, if you had a furnace of your own, I could be sure of seeing you." He let out a guffaw and slapped my back. "Well, good luck, pal!"

"Thanks," I said.

He went out swinging his arms, his head high, his shoulders back.

I pushed the beer he had bought me across the bar. I hadn't drunk any of it; the foam had settled.

"Fresh glass," I told Albert.

Dream of Drums

IT RAINED and thundered all night long; and in the background of her dream the sound of the rain stayed as a low hiss of gas escaping, and the thunder was a deep beating of drums, with sometimes a blast of rifles.

And those two things stayed through the whole dream, behind it all, that slow deadly gush of gas and the resonance of those drums. It was a gas she could not smell; but all the time she could hear it escaping and she was frantic with fear of it. She rushed about sniffing, especially where little Davey was playing on the floor with a lot of unfamiliar blocks and spools. But they were in a strange house and she didn't know where to look for escaping gas. It was all strange and new, and it scared her. Her greatest fear was that little Davey would be caught here. And the drums kept beating so that they shook through the quivering walls of the house deep into her like jarring blows. And behind the

drums marched all the soldiers, gray men without faces, file on file on file. They were not near her, not yet, but in her mind she could see them coming, marching behind those penetrant drums, legs moving with the monotony of machines, marching, gray men, between empty houses down empty streets. And all the windows of all the houses were bare and glittery, and she knew that in all the town there was no one but those coming soldiers and in this strange house here herself and Davey. And Davey must not be caught here! And all the time there was that steamy, threatening hiss of gas, and she ran about the room sniffing, and Davey too was alarmed and kept crying "Mamma, Mamma!" over and over as he sat on the floor surrounded by those new unfamiliar toys.

The doors were locked. She knew that. But the door at the side of this high gray room opened on the street, and on the street the soldiers were marching, with airplanes droning and swooping over the long column, and the drums beating louder so that she couldn't hear the planes. And then suddenly there was a quick, imperative pounding at the street door, and she crouched in a corner of the room over Davey, whispering to the little boy: "Be quiet! Be quiet!"

Indignantly Davey spoke: "Why?"

There were children's voices outside on the street now, and another knock at the door. Men's voices sounded gruff and quick. A dark bulk moved above

her. She glanced up and saw a soldier at the window looking in at her as she huddled over Davey. The soldier had a gray cap, but his face was a pasty blank without features. He spoke in an unknown language to someone beside him and pointed excitedly to her; and a third time the pounding on the door started, backed now by many voices and by faraway drums.

She said something to Davey and got up, straightening her dress as she hurried to the door. She tried to smile and felt her cheeks prickle as if they were frozen. "Just a minute!" she sang, and turned the knob.

The door swung in so swiftly that she had to jump back. A man in a gray uniform strode past her, followed by a lot of little boys. The man had lank yellow hair brushed straight back from his forehead; buttons glittered on his coat. But brighter than the buttons his eyes glittered, close together on either side of his high thin nose, little rolling black pupils surrounded by flashing whites, terrible eyes; they glittered all over the room as he stalked in followed by all the little boys.

Without surprise she knew immediately that this was the leader of the soldiers, and at the same time she knew he was mad. His face was damp and shiny; he looked like a thing crawled up from a cistern; she felt a great terror. She stood there at the door waiting for the soldiers. But no soldiers came. The man sat down on the chair in the middle of

the room. He sneered. His face was like bread dough. Then she understood that although the soldiers did not come in they were there outside, all around, everywhere. That was why he was sneering. The little boys stood in a silent line at the side of the room; there were ten or twelve of them; their faces were all turned respectfully to the man; some of them looked scared and some had tear marks on their cheeks, but they were all wonderfully respectful.

"The door was locked," the man said, pointing to her as she stood by the door. His voice was sharp, accusing; it was as if he suddenly stabbed the words at her.

She bobbed her head wildly and stammered that she had been outside, next door, that she had just come in when he knocked. He sneered, and she knew it was because he saw through her lie. Words tumbled out of her until he cut in:

"Your name?"

"Mrs.—Winkle." She couldn't think of her right name; then suddenly she knew she should lie again and she said, "Winkle." He stared at her. She realized that he knew her right name even if she couldn't think of it, that he knew everything about her.

"First name?" he demanded.

"Rose."

"Husband's name?"

"David—David Winkle."

He sneered again and rolled his eyes until they flashed white. Then suddenly he cried:

"Where is he?"

"He—he's gone. I don't know where."

She really didn't know. She couldn't think. She began to worry about where her husband was. This man knew. That was why he sneered.

"Come here!" he cried to one of the boys in the row at the side of the room.

She thought he meant little Davey, but the first boy in the row jumped forward quickly, heavily, as if he had been shoved from behind. The man looked at her meaningly; then he grabbed the boy's shoulders and bent him forward; he held up one hand with a rigidly outstretched forefinger. Then he looked up slowly and leered at the other boys and at her. All the time his finger stuck out stiff in front of the boy's face. Then suddenly he dug the finger deep into the ear of the boy. He held him wincing between his knees and he screwed with his forefinger, glancing up proudly at her as she leaned panting against the door, pushing back hard against it so that her shoulders ached, cringing there with the torture of the boy.

"Let him go!" she screamed. "You let him go!"

And very coolly as she shouted at him she was wondering where this boy's mother was. The man had taken him away from his mother, that was sure; all these boys who followed him had been ripped from mothers someplace. Little Davey—he had

come here to take Davey away. Mothers had nothing to say. Boys were for guns, for drums. But she had to save Davey.

"You-let-him-go!"

She had slid to the floor. Wordless noises broke from her mouth. The man merely looked at her. Then again she heard the hiss of escaping gas. It sounded like rain now. She wanted to look at the window to see if it was raining outside, but slumped there on the floor, shrieking, she could not move her eyes.

The man had let the boy go. Turning in his chair, he pointed his finger at Davey.

"Come here!"

She babbled shrilly. Mothers had nothing to say. This was a strange house; her husband was gone. She had no name. Davey stared at the man; then glanced hesitantly at his mother.

"Come here!" the man said again.

Davey looked sulky. He stood up, walked slowly toward the man in the center of the room. He was sneering and he held one forefinger rigid, waiting. Davey sniffled, began to cry. She squirmed forward on the floor, shrieking; but the man closed his hand on Davey's little wrist and jerked the boy toward him. Then rain beat down on the window; the steamy hiss of rain filled the room; a crash of drums thundered outside; and when the wet curtain blowing from the window fluttered clammy and cold across her face she woke, staring wide-eyed into dark-

ness, seeing there the damp shiny face and lank blond hair of the man in her dream. She lay tense, ready to writhe; then beside her she felt the warm solidness of her husband in the bed; turning, she stared an instant toward the far wall. The rain sang outside. She rolled quickly out of bed, ran across the room, and peered down at the sleeping boy in the small bed there. Then lightning flashed with a milky glow, and thunder rolled, reverberating across the sky. Shivering, she crouched a moment in the darkness, remembering the dream and the terror, wondering now, worrying, feeling very alone here with the other two asleep, feeling alone and full of horror.

(from *Mademoiselle*)

The Weight of the Sky

I HAVE NEVER BEEN one of those guys that look at a sunset and say no artist could paint it, but I have always liked to look at the sky. Sometimes I would get the feeling of how big it was and how little people were under it. But I always liked it more than most people, I think. Now I am scared of it; I got this feeling just lately; at first I was ashamed to admit it.

It happened like this. Two long-distance calls came through to us within an hour of each other, and we had to rush back home. One call was about my father. He'd been hurt in an accident at the shop. The other call was about Mary Lou's sister Catherine. She was in the hospital expecting a baby, she'd been there three days, something had happened, and they didn't know whether she'd live.

We told them to expect us about eight o'clock. We were hung up in traffic between Little Falls and Laporte, and all afternoon we just plugged along,

but after we got through Wabesha we began to make time. Coming up the Lake Road out of Wabesha, I was doing sixty-five. I didn't think the old car had it in her. It was just getting dark and we were through the six o'clock traffic. The road was clear—four lanes wide—the lake stretched out smooth as milk on the right side, the whole sky was full of juicy red clouds on the left, so that even the road was tinted rosy, and I got her up to sixty-eight. If we had been going home for some other reason I would really have felt good.

"We'll be there ahead of time," I said to Mary Lou.

"I don't know, it's getting awful dark up there in the northwest," she said.

That was the first I'd noticed it—a kind of massing and moiling up there, too dark for the time of day. But I was feeling so peaceful, I didn't think much about it. "Smell that air?" I said to Mary Lou.

"Smells like fish," she said.

"That's the lake," I told her. "That's the way water smells."

"I was brought up on this lake, Joe," she said, "and that's a fish smell. You get it in an east wind."

"All right," I said, "all right."

Then I got a whiff of clover from a field on my side. I looked at a tree and the leaves were leaning out, silver side up, flat in the wind. "Only the wind's from the west," I said.

"It shifted then."

"All right," I said. "So it shifted."

We went along. I wished they had told me more over the phone about my father. For some reason I remembered the morning down at his shop when I was a kid—how he had talked to me about men and women and different kinds of girls. I remembered how quiet his voice had been. As I drove along it struck me all of a sudden that my father was an awfully good kind of man.

The road started curving away from the lake. We passed a field of onions on Mary Lou's side. It had a queer shiny look in the dusk—greeny-silver plants and the black, black earth. Mary Lou took a big sniff.

"Wind's shifted again," she said.

I looked at the west sky. Some long, mean blue clouds had sneaked down from the north. You couldn't see the sun, but it was still light there. When I looked up ahead again, the north really surprised me—it was so dark. A few streaks of lightning ripped the darkness up there in quick succession, fading slowly.

"Heat lightning," I said.

"I don't know," said Mary Lou. "Maybe we should have taken Route 45."

Right after that we hit a mess of traffic. I had to cut down to twenty behind some old guy taking his family out for a nice ride, and I couldn't get by him for ten minutes.

When we went through Plymouth there was a clock on the courthouse. It said twenty after seven.

"How far is it from here?" Mary Lou said.

"About an hour."

"We won't be there by any eight o'clock then," she said.

"If those guys up ahead would go, we would!"

We were a mile or so in from the lake now, driving in a string of cars on a two-lane, curving road. There were big trees on each side. It was completely dark and the air felt thick. It was so dark that the car lights began to hurt my eyes, they were so bright against the darkness. Once in a while over the trees we could see lightning. Then the wind began to blow out of the northwest.

We went through Port Washington and the wind kept blowing out of the northwest so hard it tugged the car. The traffic thinned out and then a couple of big drops of rain splashed in on me. In the time it took to roll up my window it was pouring. Mary Lou rolled up her window, too. The motor sounded different, closer up, with the windows shut. I went along slow. I could see the taillight of the car ahead of me bright red, but I couldn't make out the car in the rain. The windshield wiper went faster as I slowed down.

"Boyl" I said to Mary Lou. I thought it was just a regular storm, and I was still enjoying it. She didn't say anything.

I wiped the windshield with my hand—it was getting steamy. That didn't do much good, so I opened my window a little bit. The water came in all over

me. It was coming almost with the level of the ground, more like a river than a rain. "Open your side!" I yelled to Mary Lou. The windows were all steamed up. She opened her window an inch. I wiped the glass in front with my handkerchief, but I still couldn't see out. I couldn't see the taillight ahead, I couldn't see anything in the rear-view mirror. It wasn't like rain outside, it was like a current of water. It flowed across the windshield, not slapping but flowing. It was like driving under water. You could feel the thick hard force of the blowing water holding back the car. I began to get scared. I began to think—I was never in a storm like this before. It seemed the whole sky had let loose. That was when I first thought of the terrible weight of the sky. The worst storm I ever saw, I thought, the kind God might send to show His power. I went to stop the car, but I had already stopped it.

"Boy, oh boy!" I said.

It was like being in a cave. The lights made a kind of glow outside the windshield, but all you could see was water sliding on the glass. It didn't look good. Inside it was like being in a drum, the sound the rain and wind made. Stuff hit the window beside me. I thought it was bugs blown by the storm, but we found out later that it was pieces of tree bark. I raced the motor but couldn't hear it. That worried me. I put the accelerator down to the floor board and then I heard the motor roar over the storm. But we started to move backward, like rolling down an

incline. I got my left foot on the brake—I was racing the motor in spurts with my right—and shoved down with all my strength. I thought the car had stopped rolling but I couldn't tell for sure. The kind of storm God sends, I thought, and I wondered why.

"We're near some trees," said Mary Lou. She was peering out her window with her hands up beside her eyes. I put my hand out and touched her. She turned. I couldn't see her face very well—it just looked white in the dim light of the dash. "Trees," she said again. "Will they fall on us, Joe?"

Out my window I couldn't see anything. "Trees on your side won't hurt us," I told her. "They'll blow over in the field."

She just looked at me.

"I can't see any on my side, Mary Lou," I told her.

"Are we on a hill here?"

"That's the wind," I said. "It's blowing us back."

We waited. I was more scared than I would like to say. I felt as though we were being pressed in and crushed. I kept remembering how the sky had looked, dark and terrible. Finally I put the car in gear and started ahead slow. I couldn't see, but I felt the right wheels go off the concrete into gravel and I stopped. Maybe the lights on the car ahead got flooded out, I thought. Or maybe they're on and he's right up there ahead and I can't see him. I hoped nobody behind would come barging along not seeing me.

"No use," I said to Mary Lou.

She sat very straight in the seat with her hands in her lap.

"Boy, oh boy!" I said, and my voice sounded funny to me. "I never saw anything like it!"

"There never was anything like it," she said. "Not around here, anyhow."

I wondered if she felt the way I did—as though right on top of us the whole vast, black sky hung ready to drop. Then all at once the red taillight of the car ahead showed. I raced the motor and pulled ahead a little, getting onto the concrete. The wind seemed less strong, but I didn't know for sure. I parked behind the car ahead and we waited. Pretty soon he started to move slowly. I followed him. I felt very friendly toward that guy ahead. We crawled along together. It was still black, but the wind was really milder and the water was rain now, not a current. But the sky was still up there, ready to let go, and I kept wondering if it would let loose that wind again. What was worse was the sure and awful feeling I had now that whenever the sky let loose we couldn't dodge.

A couple of cars came toward us from the other way. In their lights I could see the road. They went ten, fifteen miles an hour. I guess we were all scared. In the mirror I could see lights from behind. In a little while cars were crawling along from both ways. We were like animals poking our noses out after the storm.

Then the car ahead stopped. There was a truck parked up there on the highway heading toward us. The truck driver was out in the rain, stooping over the concrete, working at something. A red flare shot up in front of him. It beat and fluttered in the rain. The guy in the car ahead got out to talk to the driver. There was another flare behind the truck and a lot of car lights flashing. I got out, too. The guy in the car ahead came toward me. He was a big man in a leather jacket.

"Did you see what happened to me?" he yelled. "It blew me right around!" He was so excited he kept yelling at me. "Look at that car!" He pointed to his big sedan. "A car that size, and it blew me right spang around!"

"Boy!" I said. "I know I was never in anything like it!"

"That was the tail end of a tornado!" he shouted. "That's what that was! I've been in them before—I *know!*"

The rain was letting up. It was warm out. I was soaked through by now, trembling a little but warm. Cars were pulling up behind us.

"What's the matter up ahead?" I asked him.

"Hot wires down over the truck. If he moves they'll fall."

Mary Lou leaned out the window. "Joe! You come here!"

Up ahead on the pavement beside the truck a greeny-white light began to sputter at the end of

some wires. Over the truck a lot of tangled wires hung like a big vine.

I went back to Mary Lou. "We can't get through," I told her. "Wires down." I got into the car beside her.

"Could we go back and go out the Tobin Road?"

"Probably wires down out there, too," I said.

"You didn't ask what time it is?"

"It's late," I said. "We'll be lucky if we get there at all tonight."

"They'll be worrying," said Mary Lou.

It had stopped raining, the air was mild and hot. I never saw such a black night. I never felt so helpless.

"Look there!" she said suddenly.

Headlights were flashing out in the field to the right of us. A car from the other way was trying to come through there. It bobbed and snaked around in a long half circle and climbed up on the highway right in front of us. Another car from the other way started to follow it. We had to wait for six or eight cars to go through from the other way. Then the guy ahead went down into the ditch and out into the field. I followed him.

When we got up on the highway again, we noticed a lot of trees down. The road was full of branches and twigs, and the wires on the poles beside the road were drooping like spaghetti. We saw quite a few stalled cars. Once we saw a hot wire sputtering in a tree, making the leaves glisten gray.

We still went slowly, and so did all the other cars, although the air was clear and sweet. It felt as if it was all over now, but there was still lightning. I didn't say anything to Mary Lou for a while.

"Were you scared?" I said to her finally. "What were you thinking about back there?"

"Well, I just thought that if anything happened we were together."

She looked at me. "Isn't that what you were thinking, too?" she said.

"Sure," I said.

I felt a little ashamed right then.

After a while she said, "I was thinking we should have taken Route 45, too, Joe," and we both laughed.

It was eleven o'clock when we got home and Mary Lou's sister Catherine had had a baby boy during the storm and was all right as far as they could tell, and my father's leg was broken but he was going to collect five hundred dollars' insurance on it and he was feeling fine. Seeing him so much like his old self, I should have felt fine, too, but I couldn't forget the storm. I thought I would get over it, but I haven't. It has done something to change me. Those minutes when the whole weight of the sky hung loose and open over us keep coming back to me. I get the queer feeling you get from deep bells or high places, that empty feeling of helplessness, and I don't mind admitting I'm scared.

Feathers

THE HOT SAND prickled like pins and everybody kept saying what a scorcher today was, but the lake was rough and children couldn't go in. Julie kept rolling over and over in the sand, doing tricks, like the lady in the circus. Rita and Jacky did tricks, too, but Julie was the oldest—she did them best. She felt pretty bad, though, that she didn't have diamonds all over her swimming suit. The lady in the circus had millions of diamonds.

"Julie! Stay close now!"

Rita and Jacky ran close to Daddy. He had warned them. Easy for children to get lost on the beach. Millions of people here, some of them burglars, gangsters. You couldn't tell which ones; they were all in swimming suits, disguised in swimming suits. Children had to be careful.

"Julie!"

"I'm just doin' tricks, Daddy!" she explained.

He didn't pay any attention. "Stay close now," he

said. Staring at him, she pressed her lips together indignantly. He talked as if she were a baby.

A little white feather lay on the sand in front of her. She knelt to pick it up, but the wind blew and the feather skittered away. She ran after it, dodging big people's bare legs. The feather fluttered up into the air; she almost got it; it sailed down onto the stomach of a fat man. She watched it breathlessly. It was perched there like a little tree on a hill. The fat man laughed.

"You want d' fedder, li'l girl? Dat's your fedder, hmm?"

He picked it off with a fat thumb and finger and gave it to her. She took it carefully; there was a lot of curly black hair on his hand and she didn't like to touch that; it might have germs. But she took the feather.

"This is what Indians wear," she explained graciously.

"Ha!" he rumbled. "Indians—yah!—Indians!" Then he made a sudden grab at the sand beside him. "Look!" he cried. "Anudder fedder!"

Julie smiled. "That was *very* nice of you," she said. She took the second feather he handed her, straightened them both in her hands, then solemnly held one up over each of her ears.

The fat man made an alarming noise. She saw in a moment that he was only laughing, and she wondered what at. She watched his heaving stomach anxiously, then backed away, still holding the

feathers to her head. "Thank you," she said. When she got home she'd make a real Indian hat. If she could just find some more feathers. She squinted at the glaring sand. Maybe Rita and Jacky were finding feathers.

She turned to where Daddy was, but he had moved. That was what she thought at first. A big boy in red swimming pants was lying on the sand where Daddy had been. Then she got scared. All these people around here—she didn't know them. She began to run. He should have called her if he was going to move—he should have called her. But all the time she knew Daddy hadn't moved at all, he was where he had been, but she had moved, she was lost. Lost! Julie, Julie, Julie—lost! All these people—children had to be careful—millions of people, some of them gangsters, burglars, kidnapers even, *kidnapers*! She was crying now, running frantically, clutching the two feathers over her head, stumbling. She bumped hard into a big lady's leg, solid as stone; she fell and the lady screeched and dropped the beach ball she had just caught. "Ah, honey, did I hurt you?" But Julie scrambled up, wailing, and ran on. "Daddy! Daddy! Dad-dy!"

"Hey, wait a minute, sister! What's a matter?"

A man caught her by the arm as she ran. His clothes were gray and his face was gray. He was sitting on a big rock. She tried to twist away, but he held her tight. He had long folds running down his cheeks. "What you crying for, sister?" She took a

shuddering breath, swallowed a taste of salt. "I can't—I can't find my daddy!" she wailed. He squeezed her arm hard. "Shhh!" Scared, she gulped and stared at him.

His eyes, peering over her head, shot from one side to the other. She turned to see what he was looking at. Two ladies in swimming suits were playing leap-frog, screaming. The man's hands on her arms were pinching her. Julie began to sob.

He bent over her, laughing.

"Shhh! I can find your father for you, sister. Don't worry. You come along with me. We'll find your father." He didn't let go of her once. Her throat ached with sobs. She stuffed her feathers into the neck of her swimming suit and trotted along beside him. "Shhh! You don't want people to see you crying!" His hand over hers was moist and tight. They hurried across the sand.

A lady in a pink dress and a big hat stood in front of them. She smelled of perfume. She glared at the man.

"I thought so!" she snorted. "I thought so!"

"Well, my God, I have to have some relief!" whined the man.

"You got to have relief!" cried the woman. "Ha! That's a laugh!"

She glanced at Julie. "Relief!" she snorted. "He comes here to get relief! . . . Where was he taking you, baby?"

Julie blinked. She wasn't any baby. "To my daddy," she said. "I'm lost."

The woman let out a snort and said something low to the man. She shook her head and talked low and fast. Julie thought she might be swearing. The man clasped his hands together in front of him and looked at the sky. The folds on his cheeks wiggled a little. Julie glanced at the sky to see what he was looking at up there, but the woman grabbed her hand.

"You come on with me, baby. I'll take care of you." She faced the man. "And you stay right here, Louie," she said very slowly. "Right—here! I want you right here when I come back, Louie!" She yanked Julie's hand and started away. "Come on, baby!"

They hurried back in the direction from which Julie had just come. The smell of perfume drifted from the lady in a warm, sweet cloud. Julie sniffed it in greedily. The lady puffed and snorted to herself as they walked. Julie stared up at her.

"I'm almost six years old," she said.

"That's good," snapped the lady.

They plodded through sand. Then the perfume burst again into moist hot sweetness.

"But you called me baby," murmured Julie.

The lady glared down. "What you say?"

"You called me baby before," explained Julie.

For a minute the lady didn't understand. Then her frown exploded into a puff of laughter. She looked down at Julie tenderly then. "Why, here you're a big

girl and I been calling you baby! What's the matter with me, huh?"

She and Julie laughed delightedly.

"Isn't Louie supposed to come here at all?"

"What you say?"

"Isn't Louie supposed to come here ever?"

"No. He's supposed to stay home," said the lady. She kept squinting around at the crowd. She wasn't paying very good attention.

"Well, why does he come here then?"

"What? Oh, he just comes to—look around."

Julie felt puzzled. Louie was like the funny papers when there was nobody there to read them. You could just look and wonder. She didn't like Louie very well.

"Is he a gangster?" she whispered.

"Is who a—Louie? No!"

Julie shook her head dubiously. She skipped to catch up as the lady hurried through a cluster of men. Some of them whistled. Julie turned at the whistle. One of them said, "Hiya!" and waved. "Hello," said Julie politely. "Come on!" snorted the lady.

They wove in and out and ended up at the water's edge by the big tower where the lifesaver was. He was sitting up on top of the tower eating a strawberry ice-cream cone. "Hey, you!" called the lady. Julie gasped. That was no way to talk to a lifesaver. The lifesaver bent his head down; he was wearing blue sunglasses. Julie had a pair of blue sunglasses at home. After this she was going to wear them every

day. "Come on down!" bawled the lady. The lifesaver said: "Keep calm!" and started down his ladder. Wide-eyed, Julie turned to the lady. But the lady had already turned to her.

"Now this guy'll find your father for you. You go with him."

The lifesaver stood there finishing his ice-cream cone. "Lost?" he said. On the breast of his swimming suit was a kind of wheel with bumps sticking out of it. He was very big. While he talked to the lady, Julie stared at his big sun-browned leg right in front of her face; she raised her hand to touch it, but remembered that touching things was not polite. She stared up in admiration.

"Goo'bye now," said the lady. "You go with him."

"'Bye," said Julie. She smiled and held her hand up for the lifesaver to take. The lady went away. The lifesaver sighed and said, "All right, kid. Come on." Without taking her hand he started out through the crowd. A lot of people said hello to him as he strode along, so that Julie felt proud running along behind him; but most of the people he didn't bother to answer; a couple of times he answered girls, but always as if he were very tired. Still she felt beautifully happy with him. He was going to find her daddy.

"All right, kid, in here," sighed the lifesaver. He turned around to look for her. They had come to a building. Inside she could hear loud music playing very fast.

"What's your name, kid?" said the lifesaver.

"Julie Ann Desmond."

"All right, in here."

He led her into the building. It turned out to be a kind of restaurant. Over on one side a lot of men and ladies were dancing. On the other side a lot of other men and ladies were sitting at tables eating. She could just see, over the heads of the hopping dancers, a man on a platform blowing a tremendous golden horn. "Over here," said the lifesaver.

He took her to a lady sitting on a high stool behind a little cage. There was a table in front of the lady with a lot of dimes and nickels and other kinds of money. The lady had bright yellow hair and was chewing gum.

"Mildred," said the lifesaver. "Lost kid. Name's—what is it, kid?"

"Julie Ann Desmond," said Julie.

"Oh, God!" said the lady with yellow hair.

A man came up and laid some money on the table. "Gimme three, Mildred," he said. Mildred gave him three little purple tickets off a roll of tickets. He went over to where the people were dancing.

"I got to go back, Mildred," said the lifesaver.

"Four lost kids you bring me in one week!" Mildred glared at him. "You think I got nothing to do but take care of lost kids?"

"Did I lose her?" asked the lifesaver wearily.

He went away. Julie stared after him, hoping he'd wave good-bye, but he didn't. And he hadn't found

her daddy, either. She was lost again. She felt lost—lost and tired—and she began to cry.

Mildred whirled on her high stool. "Na, na, na, na!" said Mildred. "Wait now, wait!" She scrambled down off the stool. "Hey, Mac!" she called to a man in a waiter's white coat. "Mac, stay here a minute. I got to take care of this kid. Na, na, na, don't cry now. How'd you like a Coca-Cola?"

In her grief Julie remembered the lifesaver. "I'd rather have an ice-cream cone," she murmured, blinking tears away. Mildred was holding out a skinny bare arm. Julie took her hand and went with her over to where all the people were sitting at tables eating. They went up to the ice-cream counter. "What was it you said your name was?" said Mildred.

"Julie Ann Desmond."

"Give her an ice-cream cone," said Mildred to the man behind the counter. "You want chocolate, kid?"

Julie hesitated a moment. If they had strawberry she wanted strawberry. But she waited too long. "Chocolate," said Mildred briskly to the man behind the counter. "Now where do you live, kid?"

"In—Allendale." Julie had to gulp a little to stop her sobs.

Mildred frowned. A wisp of yellow hair fell into her eyes and hung there in front of the frown. She thrust her head forward and stooped toward Julie. "Allendale?" she said, as if she couldn't hear very well.

Julie nodded. "We don't live here," she explained mournfully, feeling lost. "We live in Allendale."

"Allendale? Where's Allendale?"

Julie had never thought of that question. Allendale was where she lived. It was where Allendale was. She shook her head mournfully again. Mildred muttered. The ice-cream man said, "Here we are, folks!" and handed a chocolate cone across the counter. "Thank you," said Julie. He seemed a very nice man.

"Listen now, who brought you to the beach today?" demanded Mildred.

Licking cold chocolate cream, Julie felt better. "My daddy," she said. "My mamma stayed at Aunt Julia's." The chocolate was good, but she wondered if they had strawberry.

"Aunt Julia's?" cried Mildred. "Does your Aunt Julia live here?"

"Umm," said Julie, juggling a mouthful.

"Where's she live? What street?" Mildred leaned forward.

"Ah 'on't know," Julie said, shrugging. Then she swallowed and said: "Rita and Jacky are here, too."

Mildred seemed to have pains. Her face went very sad and miserable. "Rita and Jacky," she muttered, nodding so that more wisps of yellow hair fell into her eyes. "Listen, kid, what's your Aunt Julia's last name?" she pleaded. "What's her husband's name? Has she got a husband?"

Julie stared reflectively at the brown ooze on top of the cone. She woke suddenly to Mildred's sharp

voice prodding at her. "Uncle Ben is her husband," Julie said.

Mildred straightened up. "My God!" she said. She brushed the hair out of her face. She turned brusquely to the man behind the counter. "Go get Pete, will you?" And then she said to Julie: "Look, kid, I'm trying to help you, see? Now you tell me who this Rita is. Who's Rita?"

"My sister," said Julie. "Jacky's my brother. They came to the beach, too, but they didn't get lost." She paused a moment. "I'm the oldest," she said, and bit into the cone.

A smiling, fat man with beads of sweat on his red face came bustling up. "You want me, Mildred?"

"This kid is lost," Mildred said. "Her name's Julie Diamond——"

"Desmond," corrected Julie. She squinted at the fat man's mouth. He had a solid-gold tooth in front. She had always admired gold teeth.

"Desmond?" beamed Pete. "What's the rest of it, li'l girl?"

Julie sighed. "Julie—Ann—Desmond," she repeated emphatically. The ice-cream cone was gone now and she wished people would stop asking her questions.

"That's a very pretty name," said Pete. "Now look, Julie, you stay here a little while. Pretty soon the people looking for you, they come here. Then you ain't lost no more, see?" He chuckled and poked his finger in her ribs.

She ducked the finger. The ice-cream cone was gone. She felt lost again. She sniffed and whimpered. "Aw now! Aw now!" chided Pete.

"Na, na, na," said Mildred. "You like another ice-cream cone, Julie?"

"Root beer!" cried Pete. "Eh, Julie? Root beer?"

"All right," whispered Julie, blinking hard.

"Root beer!" called Mildred to the man behind the counter. Then she pulled Pete aside and began talking to him, frowning, brushing yellow hair from her eyes, bobbing her head at Julie. Pete kept nodding; he spread his fat, pink hands out at Mildred. "Don't cross your bridges before you come to 'em, Mildred. She's all right here, I tell ya. They'll come."

The man behind the counter had handed Julie a cold, brown bottle with two straws sticking out.

"You come over with me now, Julie," Mildred said.

" 'Bye, Julie," beamed Pete.

She sucked at one straw as she followed Mildred in and out across the crowded restaurant. The root beer went up her nose in brown-smelling bubbles. Mildred led the way back to her stool behind the cage. "Stay close, now," she warned Julie. "I can't go chasing you all around, see?" The music was louder than ever over here. Julie squatted on her heels with her back against Mildred's stool. The straw she was sucking on dropped in a limp curve from her lips to the bottle. As she let root beer slide in a sweet, bubbly trickle across her tongue she watched the

people. Then at the door she saw Louie, acting rather sneaky, coming in, looking around. She clamped her lips on the straw indignantly. The lady had told Louie to wait for her. A fine way to mind, that was! Louie came across the room. Julie edged around the stool, peering at him between Mildred's ankles. She didn't want him to see her. She knew that she didn't like Louie. "What you doing down there?" demanded Mildred. "Hiding," explained Julie. But Mildred had to sell a lot of purple tickets then and didn't ask any more questions. And Louie went over to watch the people who were dancing.

Crouching there, hiding, slowly sucking root beer out of the second straw, Julie felt an itching on her stomach. She scratched, and her hand pressed something strange. For a moment she thought it was a big bug crawling around inside her swimming suit. And she was a little worried. She didn't like bugs. But then she remembered. Feathers! She had put the feathers there when she was with Louie. She set her bottle on the floor, squirmed out of her shoulder straps, and dug down into the gaping space between suit and stomach.

"Look!" she cried to Mildred. "Look! My Indian feathers!"

"Put on that swimming suit!" screamed Mildred, glancing down.

Julie slipped the shoulder straps up. Then lovingly she smoothed out the crumpled feathers. She patted them, blew at them, and licked them. Then at last

she held them proudly up to her head. A real Indian hat she was going to make as soon as she got home, a real Indian Princess hat. She glanced about for somebody to show her feathers to. "Mildred," she said cautiously. "Mildred . . ."

Just then she saw Pete far across the room nodding his head and smiling. He looked right at her and waved excitedly. At first she thought he was waving to somebody behind her, and she turned. There right behind her was Louie. He smiled and started toward her. "Hello, sister," said Louie. Julie backed up against Mildred's stool. Then over across the room she saw Pete turn to somebody in the crowd behind him and point again at her—and then she saw Daddy, with Rita and Jacky hanging onto his hands, Daddy and Rita and Jacky running across the restaurant with Pete behind them. "Mildred!" she cried. "Look!" Hastily she gulped at the straw, draining her root-beer bottle. "Pete *found* them, Mildred!" She ran out wildly toward them. Daddy hugged her in a big, swinging hug. "Julie, Julie, Julie!" he kept saying. "Where were you, Julie? Where'd you go?" He seemed terribly happy. Pete was there, his gold tooth flashing, and Mildred came, and a lot of people stood around. But Louie was gone now. Julie squirmed out of Daddy's arms. "But where were you, Julie? Where'd you go?"

"Where were you?" cried Rita. "We been lookin' everywhere!"

"Where were you?" blustered Jacky.

Mildred and Pete both began talking at once to Daddy. Julie gazed scornfully at the younger children. "I was looking for something," she explained loftily.

She waited an instant until they both stared at her with respectful curiosity. Then with a gesture of pride she held out her hand and showed them her feathers.

You're Only Young Once

"PERSONALLY," said Hocking, "I'm better off than I was before. Now you take some people, they're worse off."

He was a thin sunburned man with a beaked nose. He poured the rest of the beer out of the bottle into the glass, leaned both elbows on the bar, and waited for the bartender to speak.

"Like them," said the bartender. He was looking at two sailors walking past the front of the tavern.

"Yes, Harold," said Hocking. "Like them. At first, when I saw all these young fellows in uniform, I'll be frank with you, I felt envious, Harold. I wanted to be one of them. But, my God, that's just sentiment. You use your common sense and you see that no matter how bad off they were before, they are worse off than that now. But myself, personally, I am better off."

"How you fixed on the draft?" the bartender asked.

"I am thirty-six years old, Harold, and my wife is what you might almost call an invalid; anyhow she could never support herself, and her people are all dead except one brother. He's in the Marines."

"You got no kids—they'll take you anyhow," said Harold.

Hocking rinsed a mouthful of beer around, swallowed it, and smiled. "I got certain confidential information," he said. "I'm telling you, Harold, I'll be all right."

He twisted the empty beer bottle around. There was a trade-marked eagle printed on the label. "You can give me another bottle, Harold," said Hocking. He picked at the damp label with his fingernail, peeling off a little V of paper. Harold set a full bottle down and took the empty one away.

"One thing that bothers me, though, is that there are *some* people," said Hocking, pouring beer, "there are some people getting too *much* out of it. They're going ahead too fast. I don't know how they work it."

"Hard to figure," said Harold.

A young man came into the tavern, and Harold went up to the front end of the bar to serve him. When he had finished, he started washing glasses at the water tap.

"What did you do in the last war, Harold?" Hocking asked him.

"I was in it."

"I didn't know you were that old, Harold. You're

older than I am. Last war I sold Thrift Stamps. I got a certificate saying I sold the most Thrift Stamps of any kid in eighth grade at Thomas Jefferson School."

The young man at the front of the bar turned, squinted back at Hocking, and called, "Hiya, Don."

"Well, hello!" said Hocking. "Why'n't you put some lights on in this place, Harold, so a man can recognize his friends!"

He picked up his bottle and glass and moved up the bar to join the young man. "How are ya, Billy? Everything right in the groove? Right down the middle?"

"I guess so, Don."

"This is my friend William Stetson, Harold," said Hocking. "He is one of my old Exchange Street neighbors, eh, Billy?"

"That's right."

"How are ya?" said Harold.

"Still in the old neighborhood, Billy?"

"Well, I'll be leaving it next Friday."

"Draft?"

"Well, I enlisted, Don."

Hocking looked solemn. He laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. "I wish I was your age, Billy."

"Sometimes I wish I was yours!"

Hocking laughed companionably. "Well," he said, "I guess I know how you feel. It's not easy, but—we have to take the bad with the good, eh, Billy?"

Harold was looking at them. "You Walter Stetson's boy?" he asked Billy.

"He's Walter Stetson's nephew," said Hocking. "Gene Stetson's boy. They live in that big green house on the other corner of the block where my father used to live, across from the park there." He shook his head. "That was a fine neighborhood, Billy. I've certainly missed that neighborhood. Just those two big houses in the block and the park across the street."

"You remember the New Year's Eve you and your friends played football over in the park?" asked Billy.

"What's that? You hear that, Harold? Why, I never in my life——"

"Sure you did!" said Billy. "Sure, Don. There were a whole lot of you, fellows and girls. You were kicking a silk hat around for a football. Oh, I remember!"

"Listen to this, Harold! This young guy is slandering me!"

"I hear him," said Harold.

"That made quite an impression on me," Billy said. "I guess I was only about ten or eleven years old. It must have been right in the golden age, around 1929. I remember my dad woke up; he said, 'Holy Gee! There's that damn Don Hocking kicking a football around with a lot of drunks out in the park!' And my brother and I looked out the window, and it was a high hat you were kicking. You were all yelling and tackling each other."

"New Year's Eve," said Hocking softly. "My God, I wouldn't have remembered that!"

"Well, it made a big impression on me," said Billy.

"My brother and I thought you were quite a guy!"

He stepped back. "Well, I have to be going, Don."

Hocking reached out his hand. With his other hand he patted Billy's shoulder. "Good luck, Billy!"

Harold leaned forward on the bar. "Army or Navy?" he asked.

"Oh, Navy," said Billy.

Looking past Hocking, Harold jerked his head at Billy. He unbuttoned his cuff, pulled up his white shirt sleeve, and pointed to an anchor and some stars tattooed on his hairy forearm. Then he grinned. "I was in the Navy," he said. "Have a drink before ya go?"

"Well, I guess I better not now."

"Come on! It's on the Navy!"

"Well, my brother'll be calling for me in a minute."

Harold reached back for a bottle. "I'll have one with ya," he said.

Just then an auto horn blew three times outside.

"That's for me," said Billy. "Thanks just the same. Give it to Don here."

"Good luck to ya!" said Harold.

As soon as Billy went out Hocking put his elbows on the bar and started to laugh and shake his head. "Did you hear what he was telling, Harold? About me playing football out there in the park on New Year's Eve, tackling all the girls?"

"I heard him," Harold said. He moved down the bar to the tap and started washing glasses again.

"The way he remembered it!" said Hocking. "It certainly must have made a real impression on him." He drank, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and sighed. "Nineteen twenty-nine," he said. "In 1929 I was just about the age he is now. I wonder if these young bucks now ever kick a silk hat around on New Year's Eve! They don't have the times we did, I'll bet you that, Harold!" He chuckled huskily and drank again.

Harold stood up straight and looked at him. As he looked, he buttoned his cuff.

"By God, we did use to have the times!" cried Hocking. "I guess I was a wild one in my day. There was Bus Kearney and Art Allison and Lucille and Connie Thomas and Evie Le Berge and Lois Sandham. We all used to go around together. That was in Prohibition, Harold! The times we used to have."

He laughed again, drained the last beer from his glass, and shook his head. "Well, you're only young once!" he cried.

Harold didn't look up. Washing glasses, he splattered water around behind the bar.

"About that drink, Harold," said Hocking.

He waited a moment, then stood up. "Well, I'll be seeing you, Harold," he said very distinctly.

"So long," said Harold.

The Sharers

AT FIVE MINUTES TO NINE that Friday morning Mr. Burns, plump, untidy, gray-tweedeed, came scooting out of Room 303 of the Arts and Letters Building. In the corridor he was immediately surrounded by about a dozen students from his eight o'clock American Lit class, which had just ended. The students were all taller than Mr. Burns, and in their midst, desperately clasping five books and a straggling set of class papers to his chest, he looked very little and harried. With a series of side steps and murmurs he slipped out of the heavy traffic of the corridor and hurried down the side hall toward the third-floor faculty room. He bumped the door open with his elbow. Mr. Pennoyer, inside the room hanging his overcoat on the hall tree, looked around.

"Morning!" puffed Mr. Burns.

"Hah," said Mr. Pennoyer. His voice was rather flutelike—high and windy. He was a little, spruce, potbellied man in a dark blue suit with emphatic

pin stripes. He patted his halo of fuzzy white hair with one hand as, leaning backward, he peered at Mr. Burns. "Careful!" he chirped. Mr. Burns was balancing on one leg in the doorway, trying with an upraised knee to keep his books and papers from slipping. "Easy!" advised Mr. Pennoyer.

Mr. Burns struggled across the room and plumped his armful down on the glossy table top beside Mr. Pennoyer's neat, black brief case. "Whew!" he said, and fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his vest pocket.

"All through?" asked Mr. Pennoyer, peering down at the books.

"Another one at ten," sighed Mr. Burns.

"What's that?"

"Another at ten!" cried Mr. Burns.

"Don't hitch." Mr. Pennoyer pulled out his watch, puffed out his pink cheeks at it, and reached for his brief case. "Eight and ten for you. Nine and eleven for me. Dovetail."

"Well," said Mr. Burns, "we fill out the morning." He scratched a kitchen match on his shoe and lit a rather battered cigarette. From a nearby chair he picked up his overcoat.

Mr. Pennoyer, on his way to the door, paused. "Hah," he said, and stopped, wheeled, and eyed Mr. Burns anxiously for an instant. He took a few quick steps forward as he spoke. "Ever have a student named John Blake Lee?"

"Blakeley?" Mr. Burns was wrestling with a torn sleeve lining in his overcoat.

"Blake Lee." Mr. Pennoyer's fluty voice went up a note. "John Blake Lee."

"I'd have to look at my classbook," said Mr. Burns. "I don't think so. John Blake Lee. No, no, I don't think——"

Mr. Pennoyer seemed disappointed. "Senior last year," he explained. "Graduated in June. Don't remember him myself. Wondered if he was in your department."

Mr. Burns shook his head.

"Well," announced Mr. Pennoyer rather sharply, "he was killed yesterday."

Mr. Burns's vague look became a frown; he shook his head solemnly. "No!" he murmured.

"Plane crash," Mr. Pennoyer went on. "Flying cadet. One of that group they formed last spring." He kept peering at Mr. Burns as if expecting him to interrupt. "Heard it on the radio while I was having my breakfast. Said he was one of our men."

Mr. Burns clicked his tongue. "Horrible," he said. Smoke rising from the cigarette between his lips made him squint. He put his hat on. Mr. Pennoyer, leaning back, nodded anxiously at him. Mr. Burns knew that he should say something appropriate. He looked hastily around the faculty room. "Horrible!" he said again. He wished the old man wouldn't peer at him so expectantly. Old fusser, he thought.

Just then the nine o'clock bell rang. Mr. Pennoyer

scurried to the door. "Thought you might have known the boy," he said over his shoulder.

"No," said Mr. Burns, "no. . . ." Outside in the hall he remembered his rubbers and went back to put them on. They were too big; they kept slipping at the heels as he went down the three flights of stairs. But as soon as he got outside he forgot his irritation at them.

It had begun to snow early that morning; now the long quadrangle lay fresh and white in the sun. Mr. Burns was rather sleepy and very hungry, but as he stepped out into all that brightness and felt the sting of a few grainy snowflakes blowing against his cheeks he suddenly felt happy. Beautiful, he thought, beautiful. The trees were black in the sun-filled air. A student in an emerald-green stocking cap ran by him, panting, "Morning, Mr. Burns!" "Morning," he said, "a-a-ah." He groped for the student's name; he'd had him in class, remembered where he sat in the room, left end of the second row, Dillon, Dolan, something like that. Some men could remember all the names; he never could.

He walked past the old gray brick buildings with the round towers, then turned into the new campus, past the tan brick halls with glowing red tile roofs. I'll read them Elinor Wylie next hour, he thought—the sharp silent air . . . the hush of falling snow . . . Behind him a voice called, "Hey, Dipper!" They really ring, thought Mr. Burns, voices really ring in the cold. He felt pleased at the discovery. Three stu-

dents passing him said, "Morning, Mr. Burns," in a kind of clear rising masculine chant that hung in the air after they had passed. I wonder if they know, thought Mr. Burns, if they really know right now how good this is. He looked up at Science Hall as he passed it, brown and solid, its copper screens glittering, snow on the window sills, snow on the dead vines. I wonder if they really know, he thought.

Eleven years he'd been teaching here now; he'd started as a graduate assistant. He knew how good the place was. Not any cheap sentiment either, he thought, no school-spirit stuff—I really love it; it's a good place; it's beautiful, peaceful; I hope I never have to leave. "Morning, Mr. Burns," someone called to him. "Morning," he said. They know after they're gone, though, he thought; last year's seniors come back to visit; the ones who drop out write you those stiff, carefully revised letters telling you they certainly do remember your classes with pleasure, sir. When they're gone they begin to remember; they get homesick, school-sick. He turned up the walk to the cafeteria. But I wonder if they ever *know*, right at the moment, right now. "Morning, a-a-ah," he said to a thin dark-faced student, who held open the outside caf door for him. "How are you this morning?" Some men could remember all the names; he never could. He shook his head and pushed open the inner door.

The steamy cinnamon-fragrant hot coffee and bacon smell of the caf enveloped him, and he felt a

sudden overwhelming desire for food. He began pulling off his overcoat as he walked through the babble of voices, the clink of dishes, the bright rattle of silverware. He threw his hat and coat on a chair at an empty table, kicked off his rubbers, and looked around. About half the tables were occupied; down near the water cooler he saw old Woodicut, whose early morning greeting was, "Ho-ho, Burns! Wife won't get you breakfast at home, eh? Ho-ho, Burns!" I have to get up earlier, he thought as he piled knife, fork, and spoon on his tray. Have breakfast at home with Ellen and the kids. Too expensive this way. I oversleep two mornings out of four. Eat breakfast before class like a sensible man.

"Bacon sandwich, please," he told the girl at the steam counter. "On toast, Mr. Burns?" She knows my name, but I don't know hers, he thought.

"On white bread today," he said. But by gosh, somebody ought to tell old Woodicut he's not funny. He took his bacon sandwich, moved along, laid a half grapefruit on his tray, got coffee. "Cream on the side, please." Then he dodged down the aisle toward his own table.

"Hey!"

He looked toward the next aisle and saw McGraw sitting there, lean and sallow, blinking at him through thick glasses and beckoning with a small piece of doughnut. "Well!" said Mr. Burns happily, and turned toward McGraw's table.

"You know Meyers, don't you?" said McGraw,

nodding at the yellow-haired young man sitting opposite him at the table.

"We've seen each other around," said Meyers, jumping up. "How are you, Mr. Burns?"

Setting his tray down in order to shake hands, Mr. Burns spilled a quarter of a cup of coffee.

"Here, let me get you another," cried Meyers.

"No, no!"

"Sit down, both of you," said McGraw. "I want you to hear this, Burnsie. You can be referee. We've been discussing the elements of pity and terror in tragedy. Meyers is in my drama class. He's a brilliant young man even if his hair is wavy. Eh, Meyers?"

Meyers grinned.

"Now, Meyers," said McGraw, "pity and terror, eh? Very well. We say war is a tragedy, eh? We also say if a man slips off a stepladder and breaks his neck, leaving a wife and seventeen children, that *that* is a tragedy, eh? Very well. But you just explain to me, Meyers, what makes the war like the stepladder? Just explain *that* to me, Meyers."

Mr. Burns spooned out his grapefruit and munched his bacon sandwich. He felt increasingly content. Meyers and McGraw chattered. He didn't pay much attention to their talk, but he watched their expressions, the dark proud mocking face of McGraw, quick and mobile behind the glittering thick glasses, the clear, clean features of Meyers, very young, very blue-eyed. Mac's proud of the boy, thought Mr. Burns, sipping coffee. That's what it is,

he's showing him off to me. And he shifted his chair slightly to get a better view of them both.

Meyers was talking; he dropped a cigarette butt in his coffee cup and smiled. Nice manner, thought Mr. Burns, charming. "That's what Johnny used to say," Meyers was telling McGraw. "He used to say there wasn't any tragedy possible if you took a really long-range look at things."

"Now wait," said McGraw. "That's misquoting Johnny." He turned to Mr. Burns. "Did you know Johnny Lee?"

"Johnny Lee? John Blake Lee?" said Mr. Burns, groping; and then triumphantly he cried: "Oh, yes! Yes! No, that is, I didn't know him, but I heard about him."

They both looked at him rather strangely.

"Isn't that what you mean?" said Mr. Burns, feeling rather baffled.

They stared at him.

"About his being killed?" asked Mr. Burns.

Meyers very slowly backed his chair away from the table. He looked over at McGraw.

"No!" snorted McGraw.

"Yes, really!" said Mr. Burns. "I thought that's what you—I didn't mean to—Pennoyer just told me. He heard it on the radio."

Meyers was still staring. His eyes were a very bright blue. "I just had a letter from Johnny," he said, as if explaining something difficult. "It couldn't be Johnny."

"You got the name wrong, Burnsie!" cried McGraw.

"No," said Mr. Burns. "No. A flying cadet, wasn't he? I wouldn't have mentioned it this way if I thought you both hadn't heard. But I got the name right. I thought Pennoyer said Blakeley."

Meyers shook his head impatiently. He jumped up and threaded through chairs and tables to the cigar counter. He grabbed a newspaper from the top of a pile and shook it out straight. He looked very intense and—vulnerable, thought Mr. Burns miserably—yes, very vulnerable, standing there in the aisle reading. My God, thought Mr. Burns, I hope it isn't so.

"Did he know him well, Mac?" he asked.

"Roommates for two years," said McGraw sharply.

"Oh, my God!" groaned Mr. Burns. They were both watching Meyers.

"Well," said McGraw, "after all, you didn't know."

Meyers came back to the table.

"All right," cried McGraw, "what's the paper say?"

Meyers looked at McGraw, started to answer, then jerked his head to one side. Mr. Burns was horrified then to see tears suddenly gush out of Meyers' blue eyes. He turned away quickly, his own face twisted, his own eyes full. "Oh God, Meyers," he said softly, without looking up, "I'm so terribly sorry!"

He could see Meyers' hand on the table, the fine

blond hair over the pale blue forked vein, the white knuckles.

"It's not your fault, Mr. Burns," said Meyers after a moment. "I think I'd better be going, though," he said.

When Mr. Burns looked up Meyers had already gone. McGraw had taken off his glasses and was polishing them with a paper napkin. He blinked nearsightedly across the table. "Don't worry," he said. "I know how you feel. But it's not your fault. You didn't know him at all, did you?"

"No."

"Big red-haired boy," said McGraw. "Homely as sin. We'll have more of them go the same way. This is just the first." He put his glasses back on. "Johnny Lee," he said, and stood up. "Quarter to ten. You have a class?"

"Go ahead, Mac," said Mr. Burns.

He didn't want to walk back across the campus talking. After McGraw left he got up, struggled into his overcoat, stepped automatically into his rubbers, and, holding his hat in one hand, walked out.

It had stopped snowing. Mr. Burns strode back across the white campus with a dull bruised feeling somehow all through him. Johnny Lee, he thought, John Blake Lee, I didn't even know him. And he felt terribly sad not knowing Johnny. Meyers knew him, he thought, and remembered Meyers' face, the sudden gush of tears from Meyers' very bright blue

eyes. If I only had sense, thought Mr. Burns, kicking the snow, if I only, only had some sense!

"Morning, Mr. Burns," said some students. "How are you?" said Mr. Burns. "How are you?" He didn't know them. He remembered Meyers' face again, Meyers at the cigar counter shaking out the paper. "It couldn't be Johnny, I had a letter from him yesterday." But it was Johnny all right. Old Pennoyer had said so, he heard it on the radio. Yes, it was Johnny.

As Mr. Burns mounted the steps of the Arts and Letters Building he tried to remember all the big homely red-haired students he had ever seen, but the only image he could get in his mind was a hazy faraway one, featureless, almost formless, a blurred and shifting figure. Wouldn't know him if I saw him, thought Mr. Burns miserably.

He lost his breath on the stairs. Too many cigarettes, he thought. He was taking off his overcoat in the faculty room when Mr. Pennoyer marched in.

"Hah!" said Mr. Pennoyer. "Ready for action again, are you?"

"I guess so," said Mr. Burns.

"What's that?"

"Yes!"

Mr. Pennoyer laid his brief case on the table and went to the hall tree for his coat. "Going to the library," he announced. "Always spend this hour at the library."

Mr. Burns picked up his books and papers, but

set them down again. "You know that student you told me about," he began. "John Lee. Well, you were right. It's in the papers."

"Heard it on the radio while I was having my breakfast," chirped Mr. Pennoyer. "Didn't know the boy myself." He scowled slightly, as if remembering something unpleasant. "Thing like that upsets you," he said.

"Yes," said Mr. Burns, "it upsets you all right." He picked up his books.

"You said you didn't know him, eh?"

A featureless, formless, faraway figure blurred in Mr. Burns's mind. Then he saw Meyers' face again. "No," he said bitterly. "I didn't know him. Maybe that's part of the trouble."

"How's that?" asked Mr. Pennoyer softly. He came across the room, his round pink face expectant; with one hand he patted his hair. "How's that?" he whispered.

"Look!" cried Mr. Burns angrily. "A boy from here is killed, his friends are all feeling terrible. But you and I don't even remember him. We *should* remember him!"

The ten o'clock bell rang. While it rang the two men stood facing one another, Mr. Burns breathless and indignant, Mr. Pennoyer pink, solemn, but beginning quietly to smile and nod now as he reached out his hand to touch Mr. Burns's arm.

"Why," he murmured, "that's how I felt! Didn't

know him, but he's from here, and somehow we ought to share, eh?"

Mr. Burns jerked his head.

"That's it!" murmured Mr. Pennoyer. "We ought to share! I felt bad not knowing, not remembering. But now——" He peered up at Mr. Burns. "You sure you didn't know him?"

"I know some friends of his," said Mr. Burns.

Without quite knowing why, he patted old Mr. Pennoyer's arm. Then, feeling somehow fortified, he turned and went out into the dark hall which led to his classroom and his students.

Home Fires

CONNERTON went for a long walk in the park that Sunday afternoon, leaving his wife Margaret at home to take a nap. But when he got back he found that her cousin, Barry King, the one who was a Navy flier, had come to call. Connerton was glad to see him, of course; he made some highballs, and they all sat around talking for about half an hour. At the end of that time Connerton was getting rather bored; Barry had been in the South Seas, not in any fighting, but he had seen a lot of strange places, and he kept talking so steadily and enthusiastically that it grew almost irritating to listen. It was probably just that he was excited at being home, Connerton supposed; but even so——

“Well, you certainly like it then, don’t you?” he cut in finally.

“Like it?” Barry smoothed his very short black hair. “I wouldn’t *be* in anything else, Con! Not now!”

Connerton, swishing his drink around until the

ice cube whirled, nodded his large head several times and glanced at Margaret. He wondered if she was feeling the way he was.

Margaret was sitting at one end of the little yellow sofa, leaning toward her cousin at the other end. There was just the faintest family resemblance between them, in the large dark eyes, the shape and set of the head. "It must make you feel strange, Barry"—her lips made slow red movements as she spoke—"coming back here after all those places."

Barry laughed. "No," he said. "This is *home!*" Head thrown back, teeth showing white, he looked very fresh and young. Connerton was startled and then a little resentful at recalling how young he actually was; he'd forgotten, really, the difference between Barry and himself. He peered curiously now at the gray-green uniform, the wings, and the bright strip of ribbons over the breast.

"But honestly, you'd be surprised," Barry was saying, "how different it is out there, Margaret. The sky is different, the mountains are different, the sea——"

Connerton took a long sip of his highball; it was strong with whisky, but flat.

"I'll tell you another thing," Barry went on. "It's different at home now, too. Things have changed a lot since I was here last." He gazed solemnly at Margaret.

"Or you've changed," she said, smiling at him.

"Possibly both," said Connerton. He disliked the

way she glowed at Barry. Of course they were first cousins, they'd been very close all their lives, and now they hadn't seen each other for two years. But even so— He pretended not to notice when Barry reached for his glass on the floor beside him, saw that it was empty, and then checked his movement rather abruptly. He's had two drinks already, Connerton thought; give him a third and he'll talk all night.

"I was telling Margaret," Barry said, "before you came home, Con, about how I got left behind when my outfit first went out to the islands. For a while I didn't think I ever would get into this war. The day before we were starting I hurt my elbow playing baseball. Jumped like a damned fool and fell in some cinders. You know how they scratch you up. It wasn't anything, really—"

"But they wouldn't let you go!" cried Margaret. She looked at him proudly. "And as a matter of fact it was very sensible of them," she explained to her husband. "It got infected. He was in the hospital eight days."

"Did you go out with the next lot?" asked Connerton. He was aware that his voice was brusque.

"Oh, better than that," said Barry. "I caught up with my own gang. I'm not supposed to tell you how, I suppose."

"No," said Connerton, leaning forward suddenly with his hands on his knees. "No, don't tell me how—I don't want to know any secrets!" He snorted,

then shook his head. "You know, I suppose I shouldn't say this, Barry, but the honest truth is I envy you."

"Well!" cried Margaret. She didn't seem to know just how to react, and Connerton felt that she was the least bit suspicious of him.

"Yes, Margaret admires you and I envy you. That sums up this family's regard, Barry."

"Oh, Con!" said Margaret.

He knew that she was definitely warning him now, but he ignored her. "I tried to get a commission myself," he went on to Barry. "That was before we were married, of course."

"Yes, Margaret told me. She said you——"

"I tried the Army first, then the Navy. I didn't go to the Marines. I heard they were the toughest of all, and I figured—you know—if the others wouldn't ____"

"That was probably right," said Barry.

"But I thought I could certainly pass if I just enlisted." He stared at the rug, saw Margaret's foot, the heel working nervously in and out of the blue slipper; he peered quickly up at Barry. "Only they turned me down, too. Just the Army. I didn't try the others. We got married then." He hesitated, then spoke quickly when it seemed that Barry was going to break in. "Now in this job I'm doing I'd be deferred anyhow, naturally. But even so I'm 4-F forever. All the examiners told me that."

"Look, Con," said Barry anxiously, "somebody

has to stay home, you know. We all feel that. That's what's good for us, see? It makes us feel——"

"I saw one of those movies of the Army basic training," said Connerton.

"You understand what I'm trying to say, Con?"

"Yes," said Connerton. "You mean it's nice to have somebody at home to fight for. I understand that. Only would you like to have other people fighting for you?" He hunched farther forward in his chair. "I was telling you about this movie. As soon as I saw it I knew I could never——"

"Margaret told me about the baby coming, Con. You have to think of that, too."

Connerton nodded. He sat back, spread his arms, and looked down at his thick body sprawled in the chair. "I think of it," he said. "If I needed anything else to make me feel like an old man——"

"Well, you *are* too old!" cried Margaret sharply. "I keep telling you!"

"You don't have to tell me."

"Somebody has to stay home!"

"That's what Barry said."

"Ah-h-h-h!" began Barry. He looked helplessly from one to the other.

"Sure, I'm too old to do all the stuff Barry's been talking about. I know it. Too old and too feeble. That's what I've been saying." Connerton hitched about in the chair. "You understand it's not patriotism, Barry. Not *really* patriotism. It's envy. I'm

alive now, this thing is on now—I don't like to be just left out!"

Barry sighed heavily. "But it's no *use* feeling that way, Con."

"It's easy for you to talk, isn't it?" said Connerton.

"Con," said Margaret, "why don't you make you and Barry another drink? I'd better not have any more, but you both ought to." She reached toward Barry, wriggling her fingers, until he handed her his glass.

"Ten years ago," said Connerton without looking at either of them, "I was a pacifist. I said if there was ever a war they could all go to hell with it. I said I wasn't going to be a lamb led to slaughter. Margaret remembers that kind of talk. Everybody did some of it. All flags and drums, we thought." He paused, frowning. "Of course part of it still is—I can see that even now. But I never realized then how a man might feel if he was just left out when everybody else was involved."

"Con!" said Margaret urgently.

"All right, I'll make us another drink." He stood up. "I just wanted the lieutenant here to know how it was."

"Con"—Barry seemed rather desperate—"you said something about being involved. Well, you're involved too, don't you see? Margaret and the baby are your—"

"You don't need to draw a blueprint," said Connerton quietly.

He picked up the empty glasses and started toward the door. He saw Margaret give Barry a look; then, standing, make a hurried little gesture, as if to persuade him to wait, or not to worry. Connerton went on to the kitchen, hearing their voices behind him.

He was at the kitchen table pouring whisky when Margaret came out to him. "You had to put on your big act, didn't you?" she whispered furiously.

He stared at her over his shoulder, noting the way her lips moved; then he dropped ice cubes carefully into the glasses.

"You won't need to finish those," she said aloud. "Barry's going."

Connerton reached for a towel. "Well," he said, drying his hands, "I'll have to tell him good-bye, won't I?"

He walked ahead of her into the other room, where Barry stood waiting. "It's been nice seeing you, Barry." They shook hands. Barry seemed embarrassed.

"Con, if I said anything that made you think——"

"You didn't say anything."

"I didn't mean to."

Margaret came up. "Good-bye, Barry." She kissed him on the cheek. "Maybe before you go back we can get together again."

"Sure," said Barry, "you bet." He went out hastily; outside the door he turned, bowed, started to salute, but broke it off confusedly with a glance at Connerton. "'Bye!" he said.

"Good luck!" said Connerton.

"God bless you!" called Margaret.

She shut the door and without looking at her husband walked swiftly out to the kitchen. He followed her. "I don't know how you took all that stuff I said, Margaret," he began. "If I said anything that made you think——"

"You said quite a bit that made me think!"

"I didn't mean——" It occurred to him that he was using the very words Barry had used to him. He put his hand out toward her, but she jerked away.

"I don't want to talk about it now. No, go on in the other room. Leave me alone."

"Will we talk about it after a while?" She didn't answer. "I couldn't let him think I was just ignoring the whole war, could I?" he cried wildly. "Would you like him to think you married a draft dodger?" When she didn't answer he whirled about and stamped out into the front room. "Oh, my God!" he yelled. "Why did he have to come here, anyhow? Why does everybody have to keep rubbing it in?"

The Girl Next Door

JOE DEFFERY had honestly never thought much about Louisa until his wife mentioned her that day. And he knew of course that Jean wasn't serious. "You notice the way every time you go outside that girl's right there?" Jean said. "She's not there when I go out. She doesn't even say hello to me half the time!"

"She likes me," said Deffery. "She is a sensitive and discerning creature; she appreciates my distinguished manners."

Louisa was the young wife of Ollie Dell, who had lately married her in Ohio and brought her home to live with himself and his mother in the Dell house next door. She was a tall golden-haired girl with round brown eyes. Deffery had started saying hello to her when he saw her in the yard and right from the start she had responded with what seemed to him a charming friendliness.

"I like her," he told Jean. "Maybe she doesn't talk to you because you don't talk to her."

"Ha," said Jean. She sauntered across the living room to the three-windowed bay where he was sitting. "Nope, it's just that she's fascinated by your classic profile and prematurely graying hair!" Standing behind his chair, she laughed and, suddenly reaching around, yanked his necktie. "That's what it is!"

He jumped up and grabbed for her, but she dodged, then tripped over the rug edge, and he caught her.

"Sol!" he said. "Unmannerly, eh?"

She giggled and tried to pinch him. While they scuffled the kids came running; Mary grabbed her father's knees; Tommy hung on his belt; they both tugged and screamed.

"Let me at her!" roared Deffery, holding Jean with one hand and swinging his free arm in wild circles. "I'll beat this woman to within an inch of her life!"

"Defend your poor mother!" wailed Jean. She broke away and ran across the room. Near the window she stopped suddenly and peered out. "Ooh, look, Joe! Come here quick! Stop it now, all of you—you raise the dust!"

Deffery was tickling the children, who were wriggling helpless on the floor. But at Jean's call he stepped over them and to the window in time to see Louisa and Ollie Dell walking down the sidewalk.

"She has a new outfit," whispered Jean as if they might overhear her from outside.

Deffery saw Louisa's raspberry-colored suit, very fresh and bright, saw her hand on her husband's arm. Ollie was lean and sallow and drooping beside her. "He should have his pants pressed——" began Deffery. Then the children were swarming on his legs again. He tottered for a moment, picking a place to land; then let out a whoop and fell with precision between an armchair and a table. Tommy sat on his face and Mary on his stomach. "Get me out of here!" he howled.

Jean came over and looked down at him as he worked his face from under Tommy. "Do you think she's pretty, Joe?"

"Sure, she's—all right. Let me go, you! Didn't you hear your mother? This raises the dust!"

"She's really very good-looking," said Jean, gazing down at him a little wistfully. "And she's so young!"

Despite its disjointedness, that conversation started him thinking; it made him self-conscious about Louisa. He worked in the yard almost every evening and he began to notice how often she did come out into the Dell yard soon after he appeared. Sometimes she'd go right back inside. But other times she'd stand around or fuss a little with the flowers old Mrs. Dell usually tended. They'd say hello across the low bushes or speak casually about the weather. When the children were with him, she'd talk to them, or to him about them.

Just neighborly, he told himself, as they chatted across the hedge. She's a nice girl. It's only coin-

cidence, her being outside when I am. The summer was especially hot—he could not blame anybody for wanting to be in the open air. Yet he knew, without admitting it, that for coincidence it had become strangely regular. And he was aware, too, that on seeing her he felt the warm private satisfaction one feels at subtle flattery.

One night at dusk he lugged water in an old sprinkling can to the far end of the garden. Somebody had told him that spraying rosebushes with the hose gave the leaves some sort of white scale and he always took that sort of information very seriously. He was kneeling to work at the roots, so he didn't know Louisa was behind him until she spoke.

"Will you let me wash my hands, Mr. Deffery?" She was wearing a blue play suit and her bare knees were dark with fresh dirt; he looked up and saw her muddy hands, her round dark eyes smiling down. Behind her in the bluish dusk a firefly glowed. He noticed suddenly how hot and still the evening was. For a moment his mind didn't take in her meaning. Then, standing, he poured water slowly out of the old sprinkling can over her hands; she scrubbed and shook them; water sprinkled over her clothes. "Ah, that feels good!" she murmured.

He liked the soft creamy sound of her voice. Her hair was silver in the twilight. Why is she doing this? he thought.

"Thanks, Mr. Deffery," she said. For a moment

she waited, as if she were going to say more; then abruptly she turned and ran back through the hedge to her own yard.

He watched the long white flash of her legs in the gloom, until she went around to the far side of the Dell house. She's so terribly, terribly young, he thought. He felt queerly excited, almost embarrassed. There had been a sort of intimacy in the meeting, as if in that ceremony of washing hands a secret had been shared. I'm old enough to be her father, he thought indignantly—or almost, anyhow. Then, realizing the unintended implications of this thought, he guiltily tried to thrust it from his mind; but at the same time he was wondering how old she really was.

A few minutes afterward, when he walked into the living room, he remembered that he hadn't finished watering the rosebushes. Irritated, he turned to go outside again, but stopped and stood hesitating in the doorway.

"What's the matter with you?" Jean asked. She sat on the pale blue davenport looking very cool in her white housecoat. One of the children's play suits dangled across her knee and she was squinting to thread a needle.

"Oh," he said, "it's so hot!"

"Take a bath. I just took one. Baths are wonderful."

Looking at her, he was suddenly comforted. "I'll take one later," he said. He picked up a spread-eagled magazine and sat down next to her on the davenport.

He had a sensation of safety, of refuge, being close to her this way. The lamp beside her spilled soft light over her brown hair; her head was bent down; light made her lower lip vivid; then as he watched she pursed her lips and began to whistle softly; her small hands made patterns of dark and light as she sewed. He was aware, as if for the first time, of the good familiarity of these movements, of the many, many times he had seen her this way without truly noticing.

"You'd better put the other light on, Joe, if you're going to read."

He clicked the switch but he couldn't concentrate. He only looked at pages slowly and carefully. He couldn't remember ever feeling exactly like this before. Not ashamed—there was nothing to feel guilty about, he assured himself—but faintly anxious, yet at the same time relieved, as if he had just been rescued from what was now an ever more unlikely danger. In his present mood of security he even felt the least bit sheepish. Figuratively he was old enough to be the girl's father. The muscles of his back were tired; the calves of his legs ached rather pleasantly from stooping in the garden. He began to feel comfortable and wise. In that instant he could look back almost patronizingly on his own moony emotion; it was awfully easy, he decided, to be a fool.

Jean seldom mentioned Louisa any more. Deffery thought she would be amused by that evening's vague experience, but it seemed so really meaningless that

he didn't speak of it. Later, he thought, I'll tell her.

Then one night Jean went to a committee meeting. He put the children to bed and worked for a while inside. About ten o'clock he went out to the front porch for a cigarette. It was a soft, murmurous night.

The flare of his match blinded him for an instant. Then as he sat on the top step vision came slowly back, and with it an almost outgrown feeling of wonder and gratitude for the sky, the clouds, and stars, the rich living bulk of the dark trees on the curb, their leaves weirdly green in the light of the street lamp.

A mosquito sang past his ear. He blew smoke at it and in the instant he was back on the porch of his boyhood, waving burning punk to keep the mosquitoes away. You never saw the stuff any more—mustard-brown punk on a thin green stick, the smoke of it pungent, the tiny dot of fire tracing bright red designs in the summer darkness.

He sat there, elbows on knees, not so much remembering now as reliving with a curious emphasis a few moments of his boyhood.

Then suddenly a match flared on the dark porch next door. For an instant he saw Louisa's face, cigarette in lips, hand with match raised. It was like an expected signal. He wasn't surprised, but he wondered how long she had been waiting there; he knew

that she must have seen him. The tip of her cigarette brightened, then swung in an arc.

"Hi, over there," he called. He was a little worried by the conspiratorial hush of his own voice. She didn't answer, but in a moment she stepped off the porch and came across the grass. She moved slowly, as if she were deliberately making him wait. He stood up quickly as she twisted through the hedge. She wore a light-colored dress and he heard it swish silkily as the bushes brushed it. As she came closer he kept expecting her to speak. She'll have to start it, he thought, I won't start it. "Hello, Louisa," he said softly.

"Hello." She stopped in the grass a few steps away from him; he caught the light breath of her perfume. She raised one foot, shook it delicately, and took high little catlike steps to the sidewalk. "The grass is wet," she said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Later he decided that it wasn't that he had expected her to say something else, but that the very tone in which the words were said revealed so clearly her intense concern about something which to him was irrelevant, the wetness of the grass. He sat down on the bottom step. "Yes," he said, "it's the dew." It was a stupid thing to say; he began to understand that he was all wrong, that he had misinterpreted. And he felt resentful now; he wanted to insult her. He peered at her angrily in the darkness.

She had stepped back and was looking down the

street toward the corner. "I've been waiting for Ollie," she said. "He had to go to a meeting."

"Better not let him run around alone these summer nights."

"Oh, he'll be home soon," she said confidently.

"My wife's at a meeting, too—maybe they're out together."

"It isn't very late, is it? I fell asleep on the porch swing."

"I don't know what time it is."

"I hate it when Ollie has to go out at night," she said. "His mother's really awfully nice to me. It's just that I don't know her very well yet." She hesitated a second. "I often envy you and your wife, having a place all your own. I hope when Ollie and I are your age we can have our own home too."

He stared at her furiously; but then as she drew on her cigarette he caught a glimpse of her face, very young and serious. His anger flowed out of him in a sudden terrible shame. Oh God, he thought, what kind of person am I?

She was talking on with a kind of charming innocence, respectful and admiring, very friendly but not presumptuous. "Ollie and I see you and Mrs. Defery sometimes and we always say we hope our marriage turns out like yours. I mean, you're so happy together"—she paused a moment, her voice very low—"you're so much in love."

"Yes," he said; he had to clear his throat before going on. "That's really true."

"I know," she said, "and it's fine. I mean, you don't often see that in people who have been married a long time, do you?"

"Not always," said Deffery. He stood up suddenly. "I think I hear Mary crying. I—I'll have to run and see. Good night, Louisa."

"Good night, Mr. Deffery!"

He hurried up the steps and across the porch. Inside the screen door, turning, he saw her saunter down the sidewalk. A rush of humiliation started through him. Just at that moment she sailed her cigarette in long arching flight out to the curb. The looping pattern of light reminded him again of mosquito punk, of old designs of fire in darkness, of how vividly his boyhood had come back to him a few minutes before. He felt far away from his boyhood now, wandering about the darkened room.

Mary hadn't cried, but he stared up the staircase as if he believed his own lie. At last he threw himself on the davenport, face down, his fists clenched beside his head. He had taken himself in. To some people it might seem funny, he knew that; but it wasn't funny, it never would be—it was too shamefully self-revealing. He wriggled off the davenport, stood up, and walked swiftly to the screen door. Now he felt a desolate and sharp suspicion of himself, as of an enemy. Peering out, watching, he drew cautious breaths of night air. With an awful urgent loneliness he wished that Jean would hurry and come home.

Round Trip

I DON'T KNOW how to figure it. Now that I'm back here I wish I was still there. Naturally, it's ridiculous. I've got everything in the world to be happy with right here, my home, my wife, my work—I'm farther ahead than most men my age—and my wife's people are all here, her sisters and her father. And really those few days I spent there were on the whole very bad ones.

It seemed that I didn't know anybody in the town any more. The second day after the funeral I got very restless; in the middle of the afternoon I walked over to Oyster Bay to see if Clarence Hart was still tending bar there. He was, and when he saw me he shouted, "Well, by God, Pete!" so loud that the men down at the end of the bar turned to look at me. I felt self-conscious but at the same time pleased. Then I could see Clarence remembering about my uncle's death; as he came round the bar to shake hands he looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry about what happened, Pete. He was a good old gent."

"That's right," I said. People had been telling me the same thing, usually in more formal words, ever since I got here. There wasn't much to say to it; it was true.

"When'd you get back?" Clarence asked me.

"Four days ago. The day after he died."

"God," said Clarence. "The whole family's gone now, eh, Pete?" He waited a few seconds. "How long you gonna be in town?"

"It's hard to tell, I might stay." Thinking back, I can't understand why I said that; I knew it was impossible.

"It ain't a bad town," Clarence said. "I been in worse."

One of the men standing at the far end of the bar rapped with his glass. Clarence looked down that way and then back at me. "What'll you drink, Pete?"

"Oh—beer."

He peered at me doubtfully.

"That's all I ever drink any more, Clarence." I didn't explain that it had been months since I'd even had any beer; my stomach is not what it once was.

"Age," said Clarence, "creeps upon us. Me too." I was watching his hands as he drew the beer, the way he slid the glass over and stroked the spigot down and laid it back and skimmed off the foam with the stick; I remembered the motions and the rhythm; he was the most graceful bartender I ever saw; he drew a beer like a man playing the organ, reaching out just in time for the stops. Then while he went

back to see the other customers I had a chance to look around. It was the same as ever—the long glossy brown bar, and the voices you couldn't quite overhear in the half-light, and Clarence in his white shirt with the cuffs rolled back. There was the picture of the President over the big mirror, and some new draped flags there, and all the glasses stacked and reflected double, and the bottles below, and the bowl of eggs. One time—this was years ago—a friend of mine named Jackie Barden thought those eggs were hard-boiled; he ordered one, cracked it on the bar, and the yolk and white smeared all over his hands. I remember we all thought that very funny.

I sat there and drank my beer. A man and a little boy came in the door just behind me; I saw them in the mirror but didn't pay any attention until the man stopped and said: "Is your name Degan?" Then I turned on the stool and looked at him.

"Bud?" I said. "Bud Staples?" I wasn't sure. I hadn't seen him or even thought of him for close to fifteen years. He had false teeth now and was going a little bald. He looked at me in the same sort of unbelieving way I must have been looking at him. But it made me feel good that he seemed so glad to see me; while we shook hands I felt a little guilty that I had forgotten about him for so long.

"Pete, this is my son Billy." He patted the little boy's bright red hair. "Shake hands with Mr. Degan, Billy. He used to live here."

"Your father and I went to school together," I said.

"Mr. Degan was a famous open-field runner."

I laughed so suddenly that the boy jerked his hand away and scowled at me. On the high school team in 1924 I was the slowest man in our regular back-field; I was a blocker; there wasn't even a signal for me to carry the ball; but one game a fellow named Rudy Raksany fumbled right into my hands just after he was tackled; I was in the clear and I ran sixty-five yards for a touchdown which was then called back because the whistle had blown. Seeing me run must have been surprising enough, but seeing me make a spectacular run in vain must have been high comedy, because everybody on the team, even the coach, thought it was a wonderful joke. That was what Bud was talking about; he had been a second-string end that year. But the boy didn't see anything funny in our laughing; he climbed up onto a bar stool and stared at me.

"Where'd you get that red hair, Billy?" I asked him.

He didn't answer, but Bud said, "From his red-headed mamma," and grinned at me. Bud himself was dark; the hair he had left was still lank and black, like an Indian's.

"This your only one, Bud?"

He laughed at me. "I got three, pal. This is just the oldest. Two boys and a girl."

"Who'd you marry, Bud? Somebody from town?"

I remembered he used to go with a girl named Irene Something, from the west side; but she didn't have red hair.

"Anna Stepnik. You wouldn't know her, Pete. She's nine years younger than we are."

My wife is only a few months younger than I am; I wondered how it would be to be married to a woman nine years younger and to have three children. It was such an intimate question that I tried to put it out of my mind. Then I realized that I felt better sitting here talking to Bud than I had felt any time since I'd been home; there had been a lot of excitement; I didn't feel my uncle's death so badly, but he had been absolutely the last and only one left in my family, and I hadn't even got here in time to see him alive. None of the people I'd been with the past few days had given me the feeling of restfulness I felt with Bud right now. It was probably the sense of sharing a past, even a youthful one. I felt that with Clarence too, but in another way. With Bud it was very emphatic. I tried to figure it out. I had never been really intimate with him, but we were always friends. The last time I saw him must have been some time early in the depression; he had just been leaving town and I had met him on the corner outside the Hub Billiard Parlor and we shook hands there. Now I wondered about him, all that had happened since, with an interest and an affection that rather surprised me. I am not ordinarily very talkative, but I wanted to go on and on talking

just then. All but one of the men at the other end of the bar went out, and Clarence came up to our end, and Bud ordered beer for the three of us and a coke for the boy. Billy said, "I'd rather you make it orange, Clarence." He seemed to me a very well-behaved boy. I turned to his father.

"What are you doing now, Bud?"

I think he was a little embarrassed. "I got a milk route." He laughed but checked himself at once, as if he didn't want me to think him flippant. In a way it did seem a mild job for him to have.

"The last time I saw you must have been about 1930. You and Eddie Cottoner were just going on the bum."

"My God," he said, "that sounds like a long time ago, Pete." He shook his head at Clarence, who was leaning with both elbows on the bar.

"I was tending bar in a speak in Chicago in 1930," Clarence said dreamily. "The guy I worked for is dead now."

"Did you know McGrew was dead, Pete?"

"Charlie McGrew?" He was the football coach in high school; the last I heard he had moved to a little downstate college.

"He had a heart attack," Bud said, "at a banquet. He keeled over on the table. Clarence, what the hell do you get paid for? Let's have some more beer."

"This is mine this time," I said. The beer was tasting wonderful to me, creamy and bitter.

"You know Pete's uncle just died," Clarence said.

I believe he was worried over Bud's bringing up McGrew's death.

"I didn't know that," Bud said. He turned and solemnly shook hands with me. "So that's why you're home. He was a nice old man, Pete. I used to see him around."

"That's right," I said.

"How long you plan to be here, Pete?"

"Well, there's a lot of stuff to settle, of course."

"Your wife here with you?" Clarence peered over the rim of his glass of beer.

"No."

They both looked at me in such a way that I felt I ought to make excuses. Actually all I did was explain that we didn't get word until late, and that my wife couldn't possibly come in such a rush. "I didn't even get here on time myself," I told them. I could have added that really there was no reason for her to come; she didn't know anyone here in town, she hadn't even known my uncle. But they must have guessed that.

"You got any kids, Pete?"

"No." The strange thing was that I felt I should make excuses to them for that, too. I might even have said something, but the boy Billy cut in on us.

"Clarence, how much are your potato chips?"

"For a customer like you they're free." Clarence went down the bar; I noticed that the man down there was getting up to go. When Clarence came back he tossed a bag of potato chips to the boy.

"Drink up," he said to us. "This is my round coming."

"Eddie Cottoner and I went all over the country that time," Bud said to me. "Eddie never did come back. He joined the Merchant Marine in New Orleans. I don't know where he is now. For three, four years I used to get letters; the last time was from Cairo."

"When'd you come back here, Bud?"

"November 29, 1933," he said. That happened to be exactly ten days after the date of my marriage. I tried to think about that time, to go back to it, but what happened was that I started wondering again about his red-haired wife; for some reason I imagined her as an extremely attractive person, very young-looking, very fond of him; frankly, these thoughts became so strong that I missed some of what he was saying.

"—came into town on a coal tender," he told me. "Cold? Pete, you know how November is around here. I was never so God—" He looked over at his son, who was staring up at him, fascinated. "Boy! Was it cold!" Bud said; he opened his mouth and made his false teeth chatter; the boy laughed. I remember how Bud used to clown and imitate people; I thought his children and his wife probably enjoyed him now. "And then for a couple of years this town was like I don't know what," he went on. "About a dozen of us used to hang out down at the

Hub. You remember the Hub Billiard Parlor, Pete."

"Oh, yes."

"That was a book all by itself," he said. "A full-length book. We used to sit around down there all day, not a nickel or a pack of cigarettes in the whole crowd." He stopped abruptly, took out a pack of cigarettes, and offered them to Clarence and me. While he held a match for us he said in a queer, rather sharp voice: "Think of it! Not a pack of cigarettes in a whole crowd of guys!" I had a feeling that the accidental memory had moved him deeply. I was impressed, too. I had never felt the depression that way myself: I'd never felt it at all, in any serious way; listening to him, I felt almost inexperienced.

"When did you get married, Bud?"

"Oh, a couple of years later. I finally got a job." He grinned at Clarence. "My old man has it yet!"

"Your father?"

Clarence was laughing. "Tell him about your old man and the burglar, Bud."

"Well," Bud said, "my old man is the night watchman out at the Casino. That's the job I got in '35. You know where the Casino is, Pete?"

I shook my head.

"I guess it opened since you left town, a roadhouse out on Highway 41—it's a swell spot. Well, I got this job out there as night watchman for room and board. After my mother died the old man came out with me, and then when I got a job at Harris Hardware——"

"Tell him about the burglar," Clarence said. Everybody else had left the place now, and it was pleasant to be alone in there talking and drinking beer. The boy was crunching his potato chips, and I noticed that Clarence had brought him another glass of orange.

"Well," Bud said, "a couple of months ago a guy broke into the Casino about four in the morning. They close at two and everything was locked up, but the old man hears this noise just before daybreak, so he gets up and he fumbles around in the dark and he puts his pants on. When he finally gets himself all buttoned up he sails out into the front room in the dark and yells to this burglar what the hell is he doing there. It was just a kid—they caught him a couple of days later—but he got what he was after already and when he hears the old man he busts out the way he'd come in, through a window. I say to the old man later, 'Why the devil did you wait to put your pants on?' 'Well,' he says, 'I thought there was a bunch of them out there and they'd get me sure, and I didn't want to be found dead without my pants on.' "

Clarence hit the bar with his palm. "There's a wise man!" he said.

I laughed with them both and said it was a fine story; but what impressed me most, really, was the fact of Bud's being so proud of and so close to his own father. Since I was nineteen my uncle had been my closest approach to a father, and hearing that

story made me for the first time—and I should in honesty say the only time—sentimental about my uncle's death.

"I wish I lived here again," I told them. "I wish I'd never moved away." Perhaps I had just drunk too much beer. We had been standing one another drinks which I had already lost count of.

"You said before you might be going to stay," Clarence reminded me.

"Maybe," I said. But I still knew it was impossible.

Bud got off his bar stool. "I got to go," he said. "Come on, Billy—your mamma's going to be worrying. I have to fix a sandbox in the back yard for the kids," he explained to me as we shook hands. "But look, Pete, I drop in here just about every afternoon—if you're going to be around awhile I may see you again." Then he got very serious. "It's been good for me to talk with you, Pete," he said. "I hope you do stay here. Move your wife back home. I been in a lot of places, and this is as good as any."

"Better than most," Clarence said.

"I know it, I know it."

So I said good-bye to Bud and to Billy, who still seemed a little suspicious of me; and I had another beer with Clarence, and told him I'd be back next day. But that night I got the wire that brought me here instead. It was not exactly an emergency, but a minor business crisis, and I felt I had better come.

I have thought since that that wire was curiously like the referee's whistle calling me back. In a way

the whole experience has been like that futile touch-down I once made. And the parallel carries through because everyone here thinks it is very funny of me to say I would like to live back there. And I can see myself that they are perfectly right.

The Dispossessed

FRANCES' HEELS clicked hard on the bare floor of the upstairs hall; during the past few weeks she had found that if she kept moving briskly she was less likely to be tormented. But as she peered momentarily into the bare front bedroom (where the small blue medallions of the wallpaper glowed as fresh and clear as they had last spring when the paper was new), the old thought came sliding into her mind again: the trouble was simply that they had stayed too long in one place. Yet that was what people were supposed to do, weren't they? Settle down, take root? But the trouble was also that the new house was not like this one.

She shut the door quickly on the wallpaper medallions, not wanting to admit all they reminded her of; and as she crossed the hall to the children's bedroom, heels clicking, she felt despair like a cold pressure wrapping round her. After eight years in a house, moving was a kind of amputation; something of you

was cut off; it stayed here while you moved on to a new place—a dark, heavy, unwelcoming place—across a whole town; a new house in a new and unknown neighborhood; and the piece of you that stayed here died.

She glanced swiftly about the children's room, empty and very small-looking now without its furniture. Four years ago she and her husband had hung this pale flowered paper; they had had a chair and a stepladder with an old ironing board slanting between, and there had been paste all over everything, paste in her hair, paste on Hal's nose; but the room was charming.

She shut the door on walls that seemed all at once accusing and hurried down the familiar yet strange stairs, marked now (in the blond strip where the runner had been) by the vague and smudgy prints of the movers' shoes.

Hal stood in the bare living room, looking so casual in his old brown coat, with a smear of dirt on his forehead, that instantly, for no reason at all, she was irritated by him. Moving was quite different for a man, she told herself. Hal felt no amputation; indeed, he had already developed a kind of ridiculous affection for the new house, simply because it was owned instead of rented. If you could call it owning when the bank advanced so much more money than you did, she thought bitterly. "Have the men gone?" she asked.

"They just left."

"Did you tell them about the stuff in the garage?"

"Oh, lord," said Hal. "I think they took it, though. They were out there early this morning."

"Well, if they didn't take it, we'll have to," she said. "Go out and see if it's there now, and I'll check the basement."

"I've just been down there," Hal said. "It's all cleaned out."

"Hal!" she cried. "Do you have to *argue* about everything I tell you?" She realized that her voice was sharper than she had intended it to be; she didn't care; she felt like howling; she didn't want to leave. Except for the first six months in the little apartment over on Pearl Street, this had been the sole house of their marriage; both children had been babies here; this was the only house since her childhood that she had known intimately. It wasn't fair to ask her now . . .

"Now look, Frannie," said Hal, "will you just kind of calm down?" He moved closer to her. "You can look at the basement if you want to. I don't care! Only will you stop acting as if this whole thing was my fault?"

She started to cry; the hot tears welled, overflowed, and slid down her cheeks. She clutched Hal fiercely. "Oh, Hal," she sobbed, "I feel—so—awful!"

"I know," he murmured, patting her. "But it's just one of those things, isn't it? I mean, can we help it if they tell us we have to get out? And it isn't as if we

didn't have a—well, a perfectly decent place to go to.”

The very ease with which he spoke, his untroubled power to accept all that had happened, made her twist suddenly away from him. She couldn't give up the old, welcome the new, with such calmness; she wanted to protest; she wanted to proclaim violently that she took it as a grievous thing—an injustice—that they had to move out of this dear rambling white house, into which eight years of her life had gone, into which so much of her energy and affection had been poured; she wanted to announce to him that she would—never—*never*—feel at home in the new place. Yet, because she understood how much it would hurt him if she spoke these thoughts, she merely whispered, dabbing at her eyes with delicate knuckles, “Hal, will you check the garage, please? We haven't much time.”

“The movers won't unload over at the other place till one o'clock,” he said, starting toward the kitchen. “They're going to knock off for lunch. I think we'd better have a cup of coffee here before we go, Fran.”

She stood there after he had gone, looking at the long white-painted window frames of the living room, remembering them as hung with the blue drapes she had made last winter. She began to wonder in what bag or box or drawer or barrel she had packed those drapes. The tie-backs were in with the towels; that she knew. But the drapes? Something

like panic caught her. It was time to get busy again, time to stop thinking.

She hurried out to the dining room, her eyes sweeping corners for forgotten odds and ends; she inspected the clothes closet, the downstairs bathroom. All the time, against her will, she kept fretting about the blue drapes; she insisted to herself that they must be safe; they couldn't be lost; but even if they were lost it wouldn't matter, because nothing from here could possibly fit the new house; no more long windows that came to the floor, no more shutters with fins that closed. . . .

She had seen the new house only twice, once for fifteen minutes when they had been "looking," and once for twenty when—their days growing short and no better buy in sight—they had made the down payment. But she was sure that it had no atmosphere, no distinction; it was four walls and a roof; very solid, no doubt, but without attraction; it was not *this* house. She had been heartsick since the day they signed the papers. She had dreaded that new house ever since it became even nominally theirs; now that it was about to be theirs by occupation she hated it. And the look of her own house—this house, so stripped and empty—outraged her and increased her resentment. Everything was gone; not a scrap, she thought, not a stick of my own left; only the queer tracks, the minute dusty litter, the "muss," her Aunt Cele would have called it.

She picked up a piece of rope from a hot-air regis-

ter, coiled it carefully and hung it on a doorknob. She went to the kitchen for the dust mop she had told the movers to be sure to leave. No refrigerator here, no stove—nothing; only the painful spaces where things had been.

On the sink stood the thermos, the packet of sandwiches she had prepared, two old jelly glasses; but she couldn't find the dust mop.

"Hall!" she called out the open back door. The pear tree in the yard glinted like metal in the September sun. It was a warm golden day, but it seemed queer and far off, like somebody else's day. She realized that she hadn't been outside all morning, and she felt like crying again; in the fall of the year everything was always sad.

Hal came out of the garage dragging the lawn mower and the garden tools that the movers had forgotten.

"Hal, did those men take my dust mop?"

He gave the lawn mower a shove that made it whirl; his voice came over his shoulder: ". . . the basement stairs!"

The dust mop fell at her as she opened the basement door. Standing it against the wall, she checked the shelves here: all empty. She ran down the basement stairs, feeling a little guilty, hoping Hal wouldn't discover her. Peering about the cool dim whitewashed room below, she found that he had been right: everything was gone. She went up the stairs two at a time, grabbed the dust mop.

As she set to work on the living-room floor she thought how much better it was to be busy, how much better it was not to think. Hal came in and said, "We ought to be moving along, Fran, it's almost twelve-thirty."

"I have to do the stairs!" she told him. "The stairs are filthy!" Again her voice surprised her: too shrill, too positive. She glanced over her shoulder at Hal, but he was moving toward the kitchen.

In a moment he brought her a jelly glass of coffee and a sandwich. When she pretended not to notice him, he set the things on a window sill. "Nobody expects you to leave a house immaculate!" he cried suddenly, with a petulance that startled her. When she looked at him he was biting angrily into a sandwich; he looked harried.

"I'm not going to have anybody saying I left this place in anything but the best condition!" she cried. "It was beautiful when we moved in. Well, it's going to be beautiful when we move out!" She was wielding the dust mop indignantly as she backed down the stairs. She had the conviction that she was fighting for some honorable principle, but she couldn't have said exactly what it was.

He walked away, saying, "I've got everything from the garage loaded in the car. Any time you're ready, we'll go." He went again to the kitchen; she heard him closing the back door, trying the lock, fussing. "The men are coming to connect the stove at one o'clock, too, you know!" he called to her.

Does he have to keep pushing me? she thought. Does everybody always have to keep pushing me? It would have been easier if Hal had gone to work today; he was only a distraction. She felt him behind her, waiting, as she worked at the last step. "Fran-nie," he said softly, "tell me—you don't *want* to leave, do you?"

She made a great show of finishing the bottom step. "There!" she cried, handing him the dust mop. "I'll eat my lunch in the car."

"Oh, no!"

"Why not?" She took her sandwich and the lukewarm glass of coffee from the window sill. "Where's the thermos?"

"In the car. I've got everything in the car."

"The lawn mower?"

"Everything!"

She looked reluctantly about the empty living room; she saw the coil of rope where she had put it on the doorknob; as she started to get it he stepped ahead of her. "I know!" he said. "Let's leave everything neat and clean!" He stuffed the rope into his pocket and led her to the front door. She felt proud of her own unexpected calmness.

"You didn't want to leave, did you?" he asked again. "Was that what——"

"Oh, Hal," she cried wildly, "I don't want to *talk* about it! Please—*please* leave me alone!"

She rushed out ahead of him. When she heard the door close behind her it sounded like every other

time that door had closed; beneath her indignation she was queerly disappointed, because she had expected this moment to be climactic. In distress she paused, waiting for Hal.

Carrying the mop, he strode past her to the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry, Hal!" she cried. "I just can't seem to—oh, I don't know what's the matter with me, Hal!"

"I don't want to talk about it either," he said.

In the car, sitting beside him, she felt his silent anger. Well, if he wants to be childish, all right, she thought, trying to look at him from the corner of her eye, without turning. But surely he might have realized that this was no day to pester her with questions. The lawn mower in the back seat bumped heavily as the car went around the corner. She nibbled at her sandwich; she watched the dry black tree trunks of Salem Avenue move evenly, smoothly, past the window. Then it struck her all of a sudden that she had not taken her last look at the house before driving away.

Instantly she felt betrayed; this departure became at once inconclusive; she had expected something dramatic and ultimate from the last look; now there was only her weariness, this angry tension and, stretching out ahead, the unendurable prospect of working and living in alien rooms forevermore. Her coffee was completely cold; she threw the remnant of her sandwich out the window.

The car swung around the final corner; it slowed beside the final curb. Outside the window—imminent and unfriendly—stood the new house. She swallowed twice.

She wanted to say something—anything—to Hal; but no words came. She waited for him to speak, but he only leaned across her to open the car door.

As she stepped out onto the sidewalk, the big orange moving van turned the corner. She stood watching, almost in fascination, as it rumbled alongside, swung heavily to the left, then reversed neatly and precisely into the gravel driveway.

All the morning's work had been that of the three men wearing the funny little caps marked "Unity Movers"; she had been something like an interested spectator, crying out occasionally for gentle handling of the marble-topped table or of the antique sofa that had belonged to Aunt Cele, but always she had been outside the work, looking on. Now the three men in the little caps deferred to her; about each load, each piece, each box or bundle, they had to ask her counsel.

She stood just inside the front door, and—frowning at times when an unidentifiable item came past her—she made her pronouncements: "That to the attic." "In the dining room, those chairs." "What is it? Books? Put them there in the corner." And the men seemed to depend upon her; they smiled as they came grunting and straddling by her with their loads.

Their dependence gratified her; she had the sense of struggling under heavy burdens herself, a participant in their labors.

The gas men came to connect the stove; she told them where she wanted it, then left Hal to supervise. The water men came to turn on the water, and she got them mixed up with the men who had come to do something about the dead telephone. By the time the electric men came to switch on the power she told Hal, "Look, you just have to tend to this—I've got to tell the movers where things go!"

She rushed back to her post at the door, wondering, as the cartons, the baskets, the chests came by her, where she had packed the blue drapes, but not having time, really, to worry in a straight sequence.

Then Hal was beside her, saying, "I have to pick up the kids at school. It's three o'clock." The head mover—a freckled, lumpy man—whose name was Dave, announced that this one coming up was the last.

Hal said, "Well, now look, Dave, do I pay you or do they send me a bill?"

She stood watching the other two movers come up to the front porch with a washtub full of garden hose. "Oh, take that around to the garage, will you?" she called from the doorway, feeling a hopeless longing to be through the way the movers now were through.

She saw Hal writing a check on top of one of the bookcases; and in that instant the looks of the room

—its queer unfamiliar shape, the windows where they shouldn't be, the furniture odd and unlocated, the whole unfinished, piled-up confusion—filled her with a fresh and awful dismay. She stood there, letting the feeling grow, saying good-bye and thanks to Dave.

She stared at Hal as at a stranger when he walked over to her. "Frannie, are you going to be all right?" he asked.

"I *am* all right," she said huskily.

"Sure," said Hal, "sure. Only you'd like to set fire to the place, wouldn't you?" When she didn't answer, he said, "I know how you feel, Fran. We'd never have moved unless we had to, you know. I liked the old house, too. But we'll be able to fix this up."

She watched him as he looked, first hopefully, then questioningly, about the room. He's embarrassed, she thought; it's a shame. She linked her arm in his; afraid of what her voice might do if she spoke aloud, she whispered, "You better go get the kids, Hal. I'll be all right."

After he had gone she drifted through the clutter her furniture made in the new dining room. Everything here, she thought, but like a puzzle; it had to be put together. She got a drink of water in the kitchen. Frowning, she inspected the cupboards, swinging doors open and shut. It was good to be alone. For the first time she began to consider what might be done with this house, what might be made of it. As she

stared out into the back yard she felt the faint stir of calculation, of planning; and because she had already decided that she could not possibly plan for this house, she resented her own interest; it was like an infidelity to the old house. Then she saw the pear tree: it was very much like the old one, the other one, the one she still thought of as her own; its pointed leaves glittered like gray-green metal in the afternoon sun; a few bulbous green pears hung on bent limbs.

She went outside. As she stepped down onto the narrow cement sidewalk her foot touched something, moved it. She thought at first that it was an old weathered rubber ball left there by children; then she saw that it was a wasp nest.

It had been years since she had seen one. She went instantly, amazingly, backward through time, remembering that once as a girl at her grandfather's house she had found a wasp nest in the eaves; remembering the awe and the curiosity of childhood, the old, almost forgotten excitement, the lost urgency. She glanced up at the little roof over the back porch and decided that this wasp nest had fallen from these eaves. She felt a quick satisfaction.

She stooped, stretched out a hand, and picked up the nest, a gray paperish thing full of little dark open holes. Its delicacy, its weightlessness, surprised her, and she peered at it closely, with delight.

Just then, in the midst of all the empty holes, a tiny domed cap swung upward like a lid, and a pair of

brown feelers poked out. "Oh!" she cried, and looked hastily about to see if anyone had heard her. She put the nest down carefully on the sunny sidewalk, and sat on the bottom porch step to watch it.

Upward from that final cell a wasp was groping, its feelers waving strenuously. Its head was bright yellow and black; its front legs, still folded alongside its body, had a moist, unused look. It occurred to her that this was a kind of birth she was witnessing: a birth or a transition or an emergence; whatever you called it, it was arduous; and she felt a sudden pity, not simply for the wasp but for herself, for everything born or changing or emerging into strangeness, everywhere, always; yet not exactly pity, she decided—a kind of intimacy, a recognition.

The wasp was thrusting out its folded legs; in a swift brittle movement it unkinked its joints; for a moment it crawled rhythmically at air; then the legs settled on the edges of the cell, and using them as lifts, like a man shoving himself up out of a well, the wasp shoved and wriggled, lifting itself.

If I could help it, she thought, watching; if it just had somebody to help it. Yet there was a kind of bravery in its being alone. When the second pair of legs appeared, and almost immediately afterward the third pair, and the long transparent wings shone flat and dull and folded along its brown back, Frances smiled.

"Hello, there," called somebody. Frances jumped

up. She saw a woman leaning out the back window of the next house. "I won't come over now," the woman called. "But I'm Mrs. Davis. I guess we're neighbors. I just wanted to say hello!"

"Well"—Francis felt guilty, embarrassed, at being seen so idle—"well, hello!"

"I know how you must be feeling," said Mrs. Davis. "When we moved into this house I thought I'd die!"

"Well——" But Mrs. Davis, smiling, nodding, had disappeared. It had been a pleasant little passage, a kind of welcome. Frances looked down at the wasp again.

It was waving its wings slowly in the sun; it made a small ceremony of arching and contracting; it glistened now in the warm dry light. . . . It began to crawl.

Stooping, she peered at it. She felt a power of mystery here, a portent she couldn't interpret. She wished suddenly that she knew more about wasps . . . about . . . everything.

Car wheels crushed on the gravel driveway. Frances looked up, waved at Hal and Betts and Johnny as the car went past her into the garage. Then—knowing that she should be inside working, knowing that there were a million things to do, and that she would be doing them, insisting that Hal and the children do them, until the house by their own work in it should become theirs; knowing all this and feeling pleased

with herself for knowing it yet remaining serene—she sauntered across the soft grass to them.

In Hal's face, before either of them spoke, she saw that he was aware of the change in her. "Well," she said, "welcome home!"

The Women

MAYBE night is the time when women come into their power. Men are strong in the bright sun, but darkness is for women. Barnaby thought of this afterward, when he was going to sleep. When he was putting Julie to bed, early, he first realized that he was the only man in the house; and he felt a sudden unexpected excitement even then in thinking about the three women, his daughter, his wife, and his mother: he thought of his relations to each of them, of how somehow, with a kind of bewildering rightness, just by the fact of existing himself, he had made these three into a unity which had some sort of strange meaning, some significance so deep and involved that at last it merged into mystery.

He had been disappointed that his father wasn't home. His mother had run out onto the side porch when they drove in the driveway. "Hello!" she cried. "Hello! *Hello!* Oh, *honey!*" He had stopped the car by this time and Julie had scrambled out over all the

bags and packages in the back seat, and now his mother was rocking her tall body sideways, hugging Julie on the bottom porch step. "Oh, *honey!*" she cried. "How *are* you? My, how *big* you're getting!" She tried to get free of clinging Julie, who was squealing, "Gramma, Gramma, where's Shep? Is my Shep here? I want my doggie!" It was just dusk and he was struck with how joyous and familiar his mother looked in the sunless air, trying to get past their squealing little girl to them. "My, *my!*" she cried. "You look *good!*" She hugged Nell, who was out of the car ahead of him. "How're you feeling, Nell?" she asked anxiously. "You stand the drive all right? You didn't get any *bouncing*, did you? . . . Oh, *Tommy!*" she cried as he seized her and whirled her around in a full circle. "You let me *down!* What way is that to treat your own ma! Come on, come on in the house! Oh, I'm so *glad* to see you, I was beginning to get *worried*. Your letter didn't say what time, Tom. I didn't know what time you'd get here. I kind of figured for supper, but earlier than this, *earlier*. We're going to have chicken and it's all *brown* now, but you'll have to eat it anyhow. Come on, come on! We'll talk while we eat. I've got a girl in to help me."

The old collie Shep was prancing in slow circles, whining, with Julie hanging on his neck, and Barnaby was unpacking bags from the car, and his mother was running on as she always did, her excitement spilling out in a chattering flow of words, and Nell was standing there waiting, looking tired, call-

ing to Julie to be careful of the dog—"He hasn't seen you for a long time now. Don't tease him!"—and in the dark trees you could hear the birds against all the open quiet, and out on the road the distant putter of a car. Then, "Dad isn't here," he heard his mother saying. "They wanted him out in the country, I don't know what it is out there, he tried to get the other agent to go, but his wife's expecting any minute, she's further along than you, Nell, and he had to go, there was no getting out of it but he felt so bad, said I should tell you how bad he felt and to give Julie a great big squeeze for him, and he'll be back by noon tomorrow sure, he said, whatever's wrong out there!"

He had expected his father to be here. During the hot afternoon, driving through sun-haze on the flat cement, he had looked forward to sitting on the side porch at dusk with his father; they used to sit out there half an hour before supper, talking, watching the sun go down, drinking beer slowly out of bottles icy-wet from the old brown icebox in the back hall. But then this afternoon there had been three detours, and he knew they'd be lucky to get home before dark; and now they were here but his father was gone.

He was disappointed, but it wasn't until later that he had begun to think about his father's absence as somehow emphasizing the women's presence. During supper Julie, who was overtired, fussed and whimpered and then right at the end of the meal upset the glass of milk she had refused to drink. He

nervously slapped her fingers; he didn't mean to punish her for what was really an accident, but all this talking and the knowledge that Nell was worn out made him nervous. Nell got up. "I'll get her ready for bed," she said. "She's out on her feet."

He stood up, too. "Tom," his mother said in a low voice, "I wonder, Greta's out there in the kitchen. Dad always drives her home at night. They live on the Green Bay road, you don't know the family, I guess. Johnsons? No, they moved there since you went away."

"You want me to drive her over?" He glanced quickly at Nell; sometimes she liked him to help with Julie at night.

"Would you?" his mother said. "It's over a mile, I don't like to have her walk. It's kind of late, I thought I'd tell her to stack the dishes, she can do them in the morning. I don't usually keep her this late."

He had met Greta when first they came in, his mother proudly introducing them all; she was a big girl in a washed-out billowing dress; he had heard her moving around out in the kitchen while they were eating.

When she came out to him waiting in the car he was disturbed. She had changed her dress; she was wearing a dark skirt now and a fresh white blouse with a sailor collar. As she stood on the porch outside, nodding to what his mother inside the doorway was saying, he, in the car, saw her as for the first time: saw the flaring skirt, the good long legs, the big

stateliness of the girl; then realized uneasily, almost with alarm, that she was not really a girl, that that was just his mother's word; she was not adolescent at all, but grown, mature. Turning his head, he stared at the tiny darting insects whirling in the white brilliance of the car's headlights; over the low pulse of the motor he could hear the leaves moving in the night wind. You got to a certain age and you thought maybe now, thank God, the fever and sensitivity were gone, or at least focused, you were old enough certainly, and then a strange woman is going to get in the car with you for a mile ride home and it all starts again, with the crazy bugs in the headlights and the soft stir of the wind and the low steady motor. If she'd been a girl, a kid, it'd be nothing; he was old enough so young girls couldn't trouble him. But this woman—

He opened the car door for her. "Now you'll have to tell me the way, Greta. It's been a long time since I traveled the sideroads around here." In the light from the dashboard he noticed the blue stars on her white collar, the rounding blue braid encircling her bare firm arm at the sleeve edge. He moved far to his side of the front seat and lit a new cigarette from the butt of his old one. I'm a married man, he said to himself, what's the matter with me?

They drove through the darkness; the fields were sweet beside the road; they passed a low place where frogs croaked; it was a thick night, no stars, the air heavy and tremulous as before rain. Her voice was

clear, polite, distant; she told him where to turn; it was only a little way; soon they were there. "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Barnaby." She had long brown lashes and her face was plain and pale. Twisting the door handle, she leaned momentarily toward him; he caught the faint sharp fragrance of sachet, so feminine, so familiar; then with a little movement she was out of the car. "Good night, Greta!" He watched her running swiftly over the grass to the small lighted house.

Backing the car around, he felt relieved, then exultant. It hadn't been anything. You worried and were nervous and then it was nothing. Attraction, that was all, the instant automatic tug; it didn't have to mean anything; you just ignored it. He had her placed in his mind now, as the trees by the roadside here were placed, known marks against the night landscape, always to be recognized; not strange any more, but known and scrupulously to be admired, at a distance, though, at a distance. He let his arm hang out the car window, feeling the soft pressure of heavy darkness splitting and flowing around him. It was good to be home.

Nell called from upstairs as he came into the house, "Tom!" His mother was in the kitchen washing the dishes she had said she'd leave stacked for Greta in the morning. "Hi!" he called to her. "See you in a minute!" And he went up to Nell in the dark bedroom.

She was lying across the foot of their bed, her legs stretched out to Julie's cot: the smooth quicksilver flow of light on silk—"Daddy! Daddy!" cried Julie, bouncing on her pillow. "You have to tell me a story!" He bent over Nell; she did not move; in the light from the hall he could see the moist brown hair curling loosely at her temple—it always waved in the damp weather; he could not see her eyes looking up at him, but the shadows on her face changed when she spoke. "I'm so tired, Tom. I just couldn't tell her a story."

"You feel sick?"

"Tired."

"Sure? Anything wrong?—Be *quiet*, Julie!—The drive too much for you?"

"No."

He put one hand out toward her: her slim and delicate knees, he thought, this lovely line of bone and rounding flesh. But she quickly sat up. "No, don't. I've got to help your mother do dishes."

"You *don't* have to!" he told her angrily. "Go to bed if you're tired!"

"I want to help her." She stood up, brushed slowly, provocatively past him in the narrow space between cot and big bed; then she stood in the doorway, watching him look at her, outlined in profile against the hall light, small, fragile, very trim in her coarse green linen but swelling in the faint and beautiful curve of early pregnancy; the light caught the clean straight line of her nose, her vivid lips; she

turned slightly and it marked one breast and shoulder.

"Did you have a nice ride?" she asked mockingly. Nodding, he said: "It's getting ready to rain."

"Have a good talk with Greta?"

"She told me where to turn," he said. "I wish you'd go to bed."

He sat on the cot beside Julie, who was beating her heels savagely on the mattress. "Daddy! Please!" He turned to her. "Shhhh!" When Nell spoke again he was surprised; he thought she had gone.

"Well, she was certainly excited about getting a ride from you," Nell said. "The way she talked to your mother, anyhow!" Slowly as he watched she shifted her weight from one hip to the other, and the pattern of light on her dress changed. She laughed lightly, intimately. "Are you glad to be home, Tom?"

"Yes, I'm glad."

"As glad as you thought you'd be?"

"I don't know," he said. "Yes, I guess so. Why?"

"I just wondered." She laughed again with the same light intimate suggestion of being in on a secret. Laughing, she went down the hall.

"Daddy!"

He looked out of the dark room into the empty bright doorway where Nell had stood.

"All right, honey. Once upon a time," he said vaguely, and stopped.

"Dad-dy!"

"Once upon a time there was a little girl named Esmerelda."

"Not that one! I-don't-want-that-one!"

She was spiteful and tired. He looked down at her for the first time since Nell had gone. She lay angrily staring up at him, her arms coming out of the puffy sleeves of her nightgown in sturdy right angles, out and up, dark on the pillow, like a frame for her head. As he bent over her she grabbed his face with both her hands. "I-want-the-island!" she cried. "See?" Under the bedcover she thrashed her legs furiously and squirmed. Head down, he smiled. The terrific femininity of the child! Her small fingers were digging into his cheeks; with complete and angry confidence she was demanding things of him, prepared to be sweet if he was obliging, ready to weep if he refused. My God, he thought, slipping his arm under her, someday she'll get married, some little squirt of a boy so high now will grow up and marry her; I suppose it's all right, there's nothing I can do. Hugging her, he rocked back and forth with her, remembering his mother hugging her on the bottom porch steps when they came, rocking with her. She was warm, talcum-fragrant, and tiny; she had Nell's fragility. Now she twisted in his arms. "All right, all right," he murmured, hugging her, "I'll tell you the island." She settled back and he sat up. "Once upon a time in the middle of the ocean there was a little island, and in the very center of the island there was a high hill. . . ."

He spoke the familiar words of the story without really thinking of them, yet hearing them, like someone else's words, a kind of slow, murmurous background beyond his thoughts. He thought of the three women, his mother, his wife, and his daughter; he thought of mirrors, a hall of mirrors, down which reflections went glancing in light. Out of my mother's womb, he thought, and felt a little embarrassed—and then in my wife's contemporary womb I perpetuate my parents. Julie wriggled beneath the covers: bone, he thought, and flesh—and he wondered if the child Nell was carrying would be a girl or a boy. He spoke the words of the story to his daughter, and thought of Greta Johnson: she was in another continuity, outside this house; here there were only mother and wife and child together with him, and everyone else was far off, even his father. He finished the story and glanced at Julie. She lay quiet with closed eyes. He sat there beside her: reflections glancing in a long hall of mirrors, he thought; and, puzzled, he groped in his memory for some faint tantalizing clue, and suddenly remembered looking as a boy, in this very room or maybe in the kitchen, at a magazine cover on which was a man looking at the cover of the very same magazine on which was a tiny man looking at the tinier cover of the very same magazine on which —It was like that now, yes, overwhelming and elusive. He felt a little giddy, yet was pleased at recapturing the memory. It was good to be home,

curious to be remembering what in this very same room or maybe in the kitchen——

Softly he stood up. Julie sighed deeply in her sleep. He waited, crouching over the cot head. Then slowly he backed away. At the door he stopped, glancing at the open window across the room, then went back and gently drew the cover up closer around Julie's neck.

Then he went out of the bedroom and downstairs to Nell and his mother.

They had finished the dishes and were sitting at the kitchen table talking. Bright light glittered on the porcelain table top, but out of the back hall and the pantry spilled the brown gloom he remembered there; and the scalloped edge of oilcloth on the pantry shelves thrust its old design out at him with a sudden urgency: once he had pulled a chair over to stand on to get something from one of those scalloped shelves, the chair had tipped, he had bruised his head or his hand, his mother had rocked him——

Both women looked at him as he came toward the table, his mother sitting angularly back in a straight chair with her hands in her lap, Nell leaning forward.

"Now look, good ladies," he said, "I don't want to cut in on you, but you're going to have the next twelve days for talking. It's nine o'clock now and *you*"—he pointed to Nell—"are going to bed!"

His mother took off her glasses. "Can't he leave us alone?" she said to Nell.

"Quiet! Quiet!"

"Is he always so bossy?"

"Always," said Nell. But she stood up.

"I'd run away from him," said his mother. "I'd leave him. I'd get another man."

Nell laughed. "Tomorrow," she said. "I'll do it tomorrow. But right now I'll humor him and go to bed. I am tired."

"What he needs is a talking to and I'm his ma. Come here, Tom Barnaby!"

He pushed Nell toward the door. "Go on!" he said. "I've got to argue with my mamma."

Nell slipped away from him and kissed his mother good night.

"I'll be up to see you in a minute," he called to her as she went out.

He sat down at the table; his mother laughed with gladness. "You oppus!" she said.

"How're you feeling, Mother?"

"Good."

"I mean honestly now."

"Sure, honestly—good."

"Have you had any more trouble?"

"No-o-o!" she snorted contemptuously.

"I'll find out from Dad, anyhow. You might as well tell me."

"Stop doubting your mother! Oh, I'm *glad* you're home, Tommy!"

"Well, I'm glad to be home."

"I wish Dad was here. He felt so bad going away

when you were coming. Honestly, he just did everything to get out of it, but that other agent—I don't know whether you know him, he's a new one—Eberhardt, his name is, and I guess I told you his wife is ——”

“Wait, Mother,” he told her, getting up. “I'll be back in a minute. I want to hurry Nell along up there.”

Before she could answer he hurried from the kitchen. Nell was up in the bedroom undressing in the dark. From the doorway he watched her swift pale movements. “I'm getting *big*,” she whispered.

“Good reason.”

Mincingly she came close to him, on tiptoe, her bare feet and the flowing ankle-length gown making her seem very tiny. “You don't really like me this way,” she murmured.

“Oh, yes.”

“Well, you seemed pretty much interested in giving that girl a ride home!”

He laughed. “She's in another continuity, Nell.”

“What?”

“She's in another continuity.”

“Well, I don't like her,” Nell said, “and I never will. She better keep away from you while we're here!”

“What's the matter with you?” He tried to hold her, but she twisted away; he caught the fresh bright fragrance of her perfume.

“She's a big dumb blonde,” said Nell; she waited;

he said nothing. "Do you think she's good-looking?" she said.

"No-o-o!"

"She's big as a house. I'd hate to see her if *she* got pregnant."

He laughed. "Look," he said, "why don't you go to bed?"

Slowly she sidled up to him, very small, very yielding when he seized her. But she pressed him back after a moment. He tried to hold her, his face in her hair. "What's that you've got on?" he murmured, breathing in deep.

"Do I smell good?"

"Umm."

"I swiped some of your cologne." Laughing softly, she slid out of his arms and ran on tiptoe to the bed, her gown full and floating. He was after her at once, but she lay primly under the sheet, smiling up at him. "No, Tom, don't. I *am* tired."

"Yes," he said, standing over her, "you're tired. Why don't you let me alone if you're so tired?"

"I'm a disturber of the peace," she said. "When are you coming to bed?"

"Oh, in a little while. I'll talk to Mother for a while now."

"Well, of course, if you'd rather do that——"

"Don't," he said.

"You'd better come soon," she said.

He kissed her. "You're no good," he whispered. "I'm going over to see Greta."

"What did you say about her before? About a continuity?"

"She's not in our continuity," he repeated.

"Oh," said Nell.

"But she's our contemporary," he added.

"Oh, yes!" said Nell. "Good night now."

He looked over at Julie in the cot, remembering again with uneasiness that one day she would probably be taken away from him by one of her contemporaries, and there was nothing to do about it. At the door he waved to Nell. Then, shutting it quietly behind him, he went downstairs to his mother.

She was in the front room in the old big chair beside the dimly humming radio. The newspaper was in her lap, and the light beside her was bright; at the window beyond her he heard a pinching bug bump the screen once and then sluggishly buzz. But it was not till he was directly in front of her that he saw she was not reading. Her head was tilted forward and her eyes were closed. At that moment she looked her age, a gaunt, stringy gray woman; from her he got his big loose bones, his ranginess; he looked at her hand lying limp on the chair arm, her blunt large-knuckled fingers with the wiry sinews stretching across sunken freckled flesh. Then instantly her hand quickened; her eyes opened and smiled at him; and at once her whole body was revitalized; energy came from her with an almost electrical urgency.

"Ha!" she said. "Taking my nap."

"Did you take your nap this afternoon?"

"No."

"You wrote me you were supposed to take one every day."

"A-a-h!" she cried, waving her hand at him. "That was a month ago!"

He laughed at the excited contemptuous face she was making.

"Nell all right?" she demanded, leaning toward him.

"Sure. She was tired, that's all. It was awfully hot driving."

"How's she been?"

"Well—pretty sick for a while there. I wrote you. She's all right now."

"I hope it's a boy," she said, grinning suddenly.

"Yes, we hope so, too. But you can't do much about that."

She brooded. "Nell drinking much milk?" she demanded.

"What the doctor told her," he said. "I forget just what it is. Milk and orange juice."

"She ought to have a lot of milk and vegetables. All kinds of vegetables, raw if she can take 'em that way. I remember with you, all I wanted was milk and carrots. *Raw* carrots. I used to scrape them and soak them in cold water. Dad thought I was crazy, but it was the best thing I could have eaten. Old Dr. Adamson told me afterward I couldn't have——"

"It's not that it really matters about its being a

boy," he interrupted. "I mean we really don't care."

"Oh, no!" she said emphatically. "No, *of course!* But still with Julie now it'd be nice if this time——"

"You and Nell," he said, "you both want boys. So does Julie, she wants a brother. Me, I'll stick to girls. I don't care."

"You always did like the girls, didn't you, Tom?" she grinned.

"Sure!"

"I *wish* Dad was here," she said, as if this was what they had been talking about all along, or was so intimately connected with the subject as not to make any real break. "You know that other agent, that Eberhardt, I think he shoves off all the *hard* work on Dad. I can't say anything, you know how Dad is. But now you take last month, it was just like this. Eberhardt was supposed to go out to Silver Lake. . . ."

Her voice went on in its strong old familiar rhythm; he found himself listening to its sound, not its words. Then he realized that it was like his own voice earlier this night, a background to his thoughts, an unobtrusive steady flow of sound beyond him; he could listen to it or not, as he liked; and even without listening he could be aware of it without any distraction to the stream of his own thoughts. With Julie he could do this same thing, hear her and yet not hear her. But not with Nell; her voice was never a background; you had to listen when Nell talked. Maybe it was something in the blood, the way the blood flowed, the same blood in his mother and him

and his daughter. And thinking of blood, he let himself listen again; his mother was almost whispering now; she was leaning toward him, her eyes intent, her glasses upraised in one hand. “. . . and so Dad says, ‘Well, if the doctor wants it that way why don’t you get that Greta Johnson to do the real hard work for you? She’s real nice and she’s had experience, she can even stay with you while I’m out on trips.’ But of course after all I’d heard about her I didn’t know what to do. Still, I had to get *somebody*.”

“How long have you had her, Mother?”

“About four months. Since Easter. I wrote you when I got her, but of course I didn’t want to put things like this in a letter. You see, nobody knows if she was ever married to this man. Her mother says they were married and then separated, but she never says anything herself, not a word has that girl said since she’s been in this house about that man or her having the baby——”

“This is Greta you’re talking about?”

“Sure, Greta. You’d never think, would you? But I *must* say, if all girls were as good workers as she is, and so *nice* to talk to——”

“How long ago was all this? I mean——”

“Oh, the boy’s two years old now. I kind of wish she’d mention him sometime to me, I’d like to send him something. *You* know——”

“Does he live with her, at her folks?”

“Sure. And the best-looking little boy, Dad says.

He sees him sometimes when he drives Greta home at night. I've never seen him. You didn't see him tonight, did you?"

"No. . . ."

Just then Julie cried in the bedroom.

"Well, it was late tonight, maybe his grandma put him to bed."

Julie cried again. Barnaby got up and ran on tip-toe to the foot of the stairs. He stood there a few seconds listening. Another continuity, he thought, she certainly is in another continuity. My contemporary—

His mother clicked off the almost inaudible radio. "Julie sick?" she whispered tensely.

He shook his head, waited an instant more at the stairs, then crossed the room to her. "She wakes up that way," he explained softly. "I don't know what it is, dreams or indigestion or what. She goes right back to sleep, though."

His mother stood up. "We better go to sleep, too," she whispered. "We disturb her, jabbering this way."

"Well, I'll lock up and put the lights out," he told her. "We'll jabber some more tomorrow."

She started toward the stairs, then checked herself contemptuously. "Every *night!*" she cried. "Every night I start climbing those stairs. Can't remember I sleep down here now!"

When she had gone out of the room he started

snapping lights; he latched the front door; then, unbuttoning his shirt, went out on the side porch and stood looking up at the sky. There were no stars, only a kind of faint low-hanging luminosity. A damp wind blew. He was tired. Sometimes too much happened. He felt secure. Glad to be home. All mixed up and good. Tomorrow have to sort out his thoughts. About his mother and wife and daughter and Greta, yes, Greta. Thoughts about everything, mirrors and continuities. Tomorrow Julie will marry and my father will come home, tomorrow. He shut his eyes and the wind blew on his face.

Inside the house he heard his mother call him. She wants my father home and the baby a boy. "Here I am," he called, and went in.

She wore a flannelette gown; her hair hung in two sparse braids. He put his arm around her and led her to her bedroom. She smelled faintly of camphor or menthol.

"Go to bed now," she told him as he tucked her in.

In the darkness he could not see her face, but he bent down and her groping hand found him and patted his cheek.

He kissed her. "Good night, Mamma."

"Good night, Tommy!"

He shut the door quietly.

Then Julie cried again upstairs and, undressing as he went, he hurried to her.

It was warm and black in the bedroom, warm and black, and he stumbled toward Julie's cot. "What is it, honey?"

She wailed something wordless; he stretched out his arms to find her in the black room. "It's all right, honey, it's all right," he whispered. "We don't want to wake Mamma, honey."

"Story," said Julie, and sat up mumbling. "Story," she said.

He pressed her gently back on the pillow. "Once there was a little girl named Esmerelda," he murmured, "and she asked her daddy to tell her a story. 'All right,' he said, 'I'll tell you a story. Once there was a little girl named Esmerelda and she asked her daddy to tell her a story. 'All right,' he said, 'I'll tell you a story. Once there was a little girl——' " "

He slowed up and stopped. She lay quiet. Hurriedly he pulled off the rest of his clothes in the darkness.

In the big bed Nell sat slowly up. "Wha's a matter?" she whispered sleepily.

"Nothing. It's all right." He climbed into bed.

Very low and rich and intimate her laughter came in the secret darkness. "Silly story," she murmured. "Esmerelda."

She rolled away from him, her sleep-warm fragrance filling all the darkness. Far away, far away he heard the wind, and on the roof now slow black rain dropped quietly. Home, he thought, and secret dark-

ness. Then she laughed again. "Silly," she explained drowsily, "same old thing, goes on an' on."

He felt sleep in the dark room hover over him, soft and compelling. "That's right," he murmured to her, "goes on and on." And beside him in the darkness Nell laughed with rich and sleepy delight.

The Thread

IN THE MIDDLE of the night Barnaby heard his elder daughter crying. At first he thought it was a noise from outdoors, and he lay there listening, his head twisted up from the pillow, until his neck muscles jerked with strain. He was quite sure that if it were one of the children his wife would have waked; but she lay sleeping beside him. At last he got up and tiptoed into the hall. He hesitated outside Julie's room, then pushed open the door. "Honey?" he whispered in the darkness. He leaned back to switch on the hall light. "What is it, honey?"

She was moaning softly, with her face in the pillow. Barnaby thought with drowsy tenderness, "She's so big, she almost fills the bed." Memories of times he had been up with her when she was a baby, twelve years before, made him feel soft and old and worried anew over ancient trouble. He padded with bare feet across the string rug to her bedside. "Julie," he said, "what's the matter, honey?"

She raised her face, smeary with tears; her dark hair was tossed and stringy, a lank strand plastered her cheek. "Tooth!" she said. And then, as if the word itself tortured her, she wailed fiercely and began threshing her legs like a swimmer and beating her fists on the pillow.

"Shhh!" he said. "You'll wake everybody in the house!" But her frantic energy made him feel as if the pain were his own; he chewed anxiously at his lower lip and wondered what to do for toothache. Salt, he thought, salt; but he knew that his mind was still foggy from sleep and that salt couldn't have anything to do with things like this. He knew, too, that he ought to call his wife; but at the same time he wanted to attend to Julie himself—there was already something private and personal about his waking and being there.

"Which tooth is it, honey?" He bent over her, and in the feeble light that came from the hall he watched her eyes roll.

She put her hand on her cheek. "All of 'em!" she cried. "Oh, Daddy, I don't know!"

"Open your mouth." He felt helpless but resolute. He peered authoritatively into her mouth. "What you want," he said, "is some toothache gum. Can't you tell which tooth it is?"

"Ah one," she said, a finger in her mouth. "Oh, ah 'on't 'ow!" She began to cry again.

"Now look here," he told her, "you just calm

down and wait, do you see? I'll get something to fix it up. Now wait!"

He backed into the hall, shaking a finger at her. Toothache gum, he thought. But we've never had any toothache gum, have we? In the back of his mind he still kept thinking of salt. He searched wildly through the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, feeling the excitement of emergency; he ran downstairs and looked in the cabinet there. All the time he knew there was no use looking for toothache gum; they never had had it in the house. When he was a boy, his mother had given him toothache gum—hot, aromatic stuff—when a nerve had been dying in one of his front teeth. This tooth, he thought, feeling it with his tongue. Now it had a filler in it where the nerve was supposed to be, and he was supposed to have it X-rayed every year, but he never did; it had been five years since he'd had it X-rayed.

All this time his mind kept returning to the thought of salt, but he disregarded it. Heat, he decided, a hot-water bag. He put the teakettle on in the kitchen, rushed upstairs to find the hot-water bag. "Now wait!" he whispered tensely to Julie as he ran past her room. He got the tube of analgesic balm from the upstairs cabinet, smeared some on her cheek.

"Is that the gum?" She shrank away suspiciously.

"No," he said, "we're not going to use the gum. This is much better. Keep your eyes shut—if it gets in them, it'll burn."

He ran downstairs with the hot-water bag and a towel to wrap it in. He had a feeling of tremendous, almost noble efficiency as he filled the hot-water bag. It had been years since he'd done anything like this; but he remembered to stop pouring and let the steam puff out; otherwise, he recalled with deep self-satisfaction, the bag would jerk with pressure and you could scald yourself horribly. He thought of how competent his wife would think him in the morning; but then, going upstairs again, rather weary now, he realized that at last he must be fully awake, because he recognized how feverish and extravagant all his actions had been.

"All right, dear," he said, holding out the hot-water bag. "Here you are. This'll fix it up. Heat." He laid it on her pillow. "Lie right on it, that's a girl."

"It's all over my head now," she whimpered. "Oh, *why* should I have it, Daddy?"

Her tone, her look of outrage and misery, made him feel more emphatically the extravagance of his rushing about: while he ran in circles, she had the toothache. "Well," he said, because although he would have liked to dodge her question, she kept staring at him, "it's probably just a cavity or something, dear. It could even be a sinus. Not very well in the lower jaw, though. Well, people just get toothaches, Julie." That was the way to look at it. It was a fact, not a problem.

"But why?"

"Is this the first toothache you've ever had?"

"Sure."

For an instant he felt pity at the innocence, the inexperience of pain. Then he caught the full, troubling significance of her question. How was he going to explain why there are toothaches, why there is suffering? He didn't want to make any answer; he wished she never would ask questions like this. Yet he vaguely remembered a time when he, too, had felt any trouble or hurt, any suffering, as an inexplicable affront; and he knew the indignity she was feeling as well as the pain. She was moaning softly, nuzzling the hot-water bag.

"Shhh!" He smoothed her hair. "It'll be better in a minute. Maybe you'd better take an aspirin, too."

He got an aspirin and a glass of water from the bathroom. Doing things was easier than talking. "Swallow it on the other side," he warned her. "Don't let the cold water get on the tooth."

She gulped the aspirin carefully, and he began to feel relieved. After all, he thought, it's only a toothache. I've done everything that can be done. To Julie he said: "We'll call Dr. Blane in the morning. He'll fix it up for you, poor old kid."

"I hate dentists."

"Oh, now——"

"I hate what they do! I hate toothaches! I wish I didn't have any teeth! Why should——"

"Listen, Julie," he said sternly, "there are a lot of things worse than this, you know."

She looked at him so accusingly that he felt

ashamed. It was true, he defended himself, meeting her eyes; most things were worse than this; this was insignificant, really. But he hated disillusioning her; it didn't seem the time. "Now, do you think you can get back to sleep?" he asked.

"It's some better," she said.

"Oh, I'm glad, honey!" The fervor of his gratitude surprised him; he found that he was rather shaky. "It's not much fun, is it?"

"Uh-uh."

"You call me if you have any more trouble. I'll be sort of listening."

She stretched up one arm, pulled his face down, and kissed him. "Thanks, Daddy," she whispered.

Again, as when he had gone into her room, he felt how much a part of him she was. "All right," he said. "All right, let me go. You're hurting my neck."

"It does feel better, Daddy."

"That's good."

He waited a second, wondering if she would be quiet now. Then, as he turned off the hall light, he remembered about the salt. When he had been very small, one night at his grandmother's house, he had had a toothache and his grandmother had given him a little bag of heated salt to hold on his jaw. That was it, he thought, waiting there in the darkness. Remembering gave him a queer satisfaction; it completed something in his mind. And as he stood there, the memory grew so vivid—his grandmother bending over with the little cloth bag in her hand, her faintly

accented voice murmuring, the kerosene lamp on the table, the dry, hot graininess of the salt—so vivid and immediate that he felt a quick, bittersweet nostalgia for that time of early—whatever it was, freshness, unawareness, like Julie's tonight, before pain settled in and became normal and graded and unquestionable. In the thick darkness of the hall he waited, slightly rueful and very tired, listening at his daughter's door and feeling dimly the whole, long, intimate continuity between that other night and this one.

Compline

"WITH ALL THESE new things," she cried over the voice of the radio announcer sputtering out the night's news from his little lighted mahogany box in the corner of the blue-papered room, "why, with all these new things they could blow the earth right off its course!"

"Ah, no." But he was struck by the strangeness of their matching thoughts; we're very close, he decided; for what she said had expressed a notion that had come to him too, long ago for the first time and constantly ever since, as he read the papers and pondered the news; but tonight again even more strongly as he listened to the radio. Only it was a notion he didn't like to hear phrased: better keep it submerged, sunken in the mind.

But Mary Lou always let her thoughts float out into words. "They could!" she protested now. "Why, suppose they exploded too many of them in one place, they could knock a chip right off the side!

Wouldn't that upset the balance?" As she stared at him, her frown making the two little familiar anxious lines stand upright between her brows, he knew that soon against his will he would have to begin worrying with her (and all the time the radio announcer kept fretting portentously in the corner). "Why, it would make us a dead star!" Mary Lou cried. "A chunk of the earth shooting off all alone that way! We might be on it, Johnny!"

"It couldn't happen." He made his voice scornful, even patronizing, though he didn't want to hurt her. "They've got scientists to figure all that."

"Oh, scientists! Figuring! With new things like this how can they tell what they're figuring? Why, they could split the earth right in two!" Her mouth kept the look of gasping wonder which the words had given it; and he saw vividly the horrid vision that was in her mind, the round world like an old weathered croquet ball cracking with the grain, and the two pieces halving and falling, spilling in space; he got a little dizzy. Standing, he strode over to the radio in the corner, turned the knob, killed with a click the announcer's unctuous passion.

"My God, Mary Lou," he told her, "I wish you wouldn't be so tense about everything!"

"Maybe for us it wouldn't be so bad," she said, her eyes moving over the blue walls, the creamy woodwork, the crisp swooping white curtains beyond which the window glass glittered against darkness. "I mean we're older, Johnny. We've had some-

thing." Her eyes kept going around the room. "What worries me really is the kids."

"Listen"—he sat down on the green needle-point chair opposite her—"I read them a story the other night. You remember, the one about the girl who saw the ax on the cellar wall, and she started to cry because someday if she had a baby the ax might fall on it?"

"Clever Elsie." Mary Lou nodded solemnly. "I know just how she felt!" She laughed, then nervously turned her bright brown eyes away. "But it's got so I just hate to hear the news on the radio every night, Johnny! Honestly! Why, suppose just a little piece cracked off!"

He didn't want to look at her; her face, shaded on one side, strangely golden on the other from the glow of the table lamp beside her, was like a mask of itself, motionless and lovely. Looking at her, he felt suddenly perturbed, harassed, indignant; because she had no right to be this way, to talk this way; she was simply making up a mood for herself and for him; she was conjuring up fear as a child might, for the joy of the goose-bumps; if she felt the terror really, deeply, the way he did, she wouldn't go on like this, talking without a thought of what the words exposed. "Suppose," she was saying, "that they just cracked off enough to mess up the balance, the gravity or whatever it is—you know, the pull and the tug. Suppose they just wrecked the solar system a little bit, Johnny, so we swung nearer to the sun, or

farther away. You see what I mean?" Her head tilted as she turned to him. "What would happen then?"

"I don't know what would happen then!" he cried angrily. "I don't want to talk about it, Mary Lou!"

"You know what Dolly Plunkett said yesterday? It was funny at the time, I laughed at it, but now I don't know. 'I'm going to get the kids all baptized,' Dolly said, 'and then we'll move out into the country!' "

He made himself smile; he felt his cheeks move stiffly. "Well, our kids are baptized," he told her; but there was something wrong with his tone; he sounded as if he was agreeing, only he didn't want to agree. As for moving out into the country, he thought—

"It could be the end of the world," Mary Lou said. "Armageddon, isn't that what they call it? A woman came to the door last week, she wanted to give me some pamphlets. 'Are you going to be with the sheep or the goats at Armageddon?' she said. Why, I felt as if she was putting a curse on me!"

"Mary Lou," he cried, "stop it now, will you? You know how I feel!" But even as he heard his own voice, too strained, too plaintive, too highly charged with irritation, he wondered if she did know. Many times he may have hinted, but he had never told her outright. There was no way to tell her, to tell anyone; there were no words for his burden; he carried wordless fear forever with an awful solicitude, and

nobody knew. He feared the arrow by day, and the plague by night, and the noonday attack of the demon. He was not able to mention these fears. Even if he could have got over the shame of an open confession, there would have been no words; for how could a man express the years of little miserable forebodings, the daily hauntings, the mean apprehensions of this and the furtive anticipations of that—of germs and fire and illness and death; of poverty, decay, destitution, and pain—most of all the nameless, fierce, innumerable sufferings that are possible for those he loves? Oh, the possibilities were endless, of course; and they grew worse all the time: he was anxious for his son and troubled for his daughter, of what their futures would be; he worried about Mary Lou in ways he knew were foolish. He habitually foresaw too much, that was his trouble; he knew his weakness precisely, but knowing did not help him to control it. Sometimes his feeling was only an indefinite, large, unfocused foreboding. Other times it centered down strangely on particular objects. At night, driving through the country, with the headlights bright on the cement, he could be put into terror by dark shapeless bulks at the side of the road; when he came into strange towns the lurid flame from a factory chimney could awe him. When he went through his own basement doorway he habitually held his arm up over his head, to ward off the blow that might be struck by someone, anyone, lurking there sometime, any time. Walking by night, he

carefully watched tree trunks in the darkness between street lights: strange forms sometimes prowled behind them. The sound of sirens gave him always the immediate certainty that they shrilled for him—for his house, his wife, his boy or his girl.

His fear was like a rumble of thunder heard constantly, ominous and far off, but always with the chance of the blast overhead, and the long bright imminent shaft aimed straight down. Not that he was a faithless man; he knew what he was, a kind of chronic anticipator; but, though always troubled, he was valiant in his shame; he had hope; he believed in God, redemption, and heaven; and he fought his involuntary tremblings and his small eternal cautions with resolution and with a terrible self-disgust. He kept the fear inside, where it did not show. People spoke of him as a charming man; he knew his reputation for good sense and normality. He was no fool, though sometimes he did look back with what he thought was a kind of foolish wistfulness to the days before he had given hostages to fortune, the golden days when he had been free from all concern. Only, looking back, he wondered if he was not deceived in the past; he wondered if really there had ever been a time when he had not worried. Watching his wife now, he realized that she did not understand at all the turmoil she had just stirred in him; and he was glad. Yet the sudden queer reverse she gave to their talk surprised him.

"It's not Clever Elsie at all, I suppose," she mur-

mured, as if this had been the question all along, as if this was really the important thing. "It's Chicken-licken. You remember? The little hen who thought the sky was falling?"

"An acorn dropped on her head. I know." He spoke coldly. He had read that story, too, to the kids. "But you seemed to think this was more than an acorn."

"That's it. Don't you see what I mean, Johnny? Clever Elsie was just a fool, worrying about a silly far-off chance. Nothing ever happened to her. But Chicken-licken—she was worrying about a real thing—about the sky falling. She really had something! Because of course the sky always falls, for everybody——" She paused, to look at him searchingly, gravely. "You remember how the story ends, don't you?"

"The fox eats her up while she's on her way to tell the king."

"Sure!" cried Mary Lou. "Either the sky falls or the fox eats you up! Don't you see? Either way it's death, isn't it? I mean I'm not worrying about just any old thing, like Clever Elsie. What I'm bothered by is that awful close-up feeling——"

The small movement of her hands, their sudden light desperate flutter, shocked him even more deeply than her words: he knew that he had to do something for her. "Don't you remember how the kids laughed at that story of Chicken-licken? It's a *funny* story, you know." I'm trying to preach, he thought. And at the same instant he was struck by

what seemed this completely new revelation of her depths, of her secret ranges of fear, the places in her which, no matter how great the love and knowledge, he had never before known. At another time it might have hurt him to realize how much within her he had never reached. But tonight the realization was queerly gratifying; because if he hadn't known Mary Lou deeply, then he had known no one at all; and if she was full of these dark concerns, then perhaps everybody was, and instead of a man isolated, worrying alone, maybe he was like everyone else in his perpetual care. Maybe anxiety went with mankind; maybe man really was the animal that worries and hopes, that anticipates pain and trouble, but with a certain valiance——

He stood up suddenly. "Come on outside!"

She stared at him, then rose, almost unwillingly, and followed. He led her by the hand through the front door, across the old, springy, yielding boards of the porch, down the hollow-sounding steps to the grass. The dampness of dew was cool about them; the grass glistened gray in the starlight. "Look up," he said, his arm about her. Over them the sky arched open and deep, abiding, familiar, yet always strange; there were no clouds; only the stars like hard little green-blue holes in a curtain, light shining through. But they were worlds, he knew; worlds riding there by design and on purpose, keeping their places in an overwhelming pattern; and the sense of unworthiness before mystery was so strong in him all at once

that he wished he could feel this way forever; he hoped she felt this way, looking with him at the stars; tightening his arm about her, he pulled her close, gently, and their bodies touched side to side. "Over there," he whispered. And beyond the eaves of their house they saw the moon, low down, a clear sickle. "There's your dead star," he told her; "it moves with all the others."

"Oh, I know," she said.

"You know what?"

"It's foolish not to—trust."

"Everybody's foolish."

A man leading a dog went down the sidewalk across the street; the dog stopped and the man waited. "Come on, come on!" cried the man, his voice carrying sharply through the darkness; and then his footsteps resumed, and the dog, silver in the starshine, jerked along again beside him.

"The point is," said Mary Lou, "that there's nothing to do but go right on."

Again he had the feeling that she had taken up the conversation from far back somewhere. "I guess that's the point," he said; but he felt a little guilty, because she acted as if somehow he had helped her, enlightened her, while he felt that somehow, by a phrase or a look or simply by her presence, she had strangely helped and enlightened him. He stepped away from her, turning, intending to speak; but she spoke first, turning, too, and facing him.

"I'm glad we married each other, Johnny."

He swallowed. "That's nice of you, Mary Lou."

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

"I guess so. I feel the same way, of course."

"Are you going to work late tonight?"

"I've got about an hour's stuff to do."

"Don't," she said. "Let it go. Come to bed."

He looked up at the moon and the stars. "Mary Lou," he said, "there's a lot about me you don't know, and I'd like to tell you about it. But not tonight." He turned slowly, she linked her arm in his, and together, rhythmically, almost solemnly, they walked through the darkness toward the bright open door of their house.

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